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A DOUBTING HEART.



A DOUBTING HEART.

BY

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In Three Volumes.

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A DOUBTING HEART.

CHAPTER I.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

Entbehren sollst du, sollst entbehren,
Das ist der ewige Gesang.

EMMIE behaved, according to Sir Francis's views of companionship, unexceptionably on the journey. She answered in a soft little voice, whenever he spoke to her, looked after her own travelling bag and rug when they changed carriages, and when tears came, shed them quietly and unostentatiously in a corner of the carriage with her face turned, so as to let him see as little of them as possible.

“Poor child, poor child!” he thought, giving her all the more attention because she exacted so little. “How sensibly she behaves, that old donkey of a father of hers was not worth such nice quiet tears; she shan't miss him, I vow. Something must and shall be thought of for

her.” And when it grew too dark to read the newspaper, Sir Francis, who had worked out all the legal problems requiring his immediate attention on his previous night’s journey, actually allowed his thoughts to stray to his own family affairs, and elaborated a whole midsummer night’s dream of speculative fancies, while the train carried them on, through the early hours of the soft southern night. “What was that hint about a marriage for Emmie in one of his wife’s late letters—Wynyard Anstice? But was not he the man in whom Alma had once appeared to be interested, who had once spoken about Alma to him, in a way that he liked. Would it be well for Alma’s happiness, under present circumstances, that he should connect himself with the family; might it not give rise to unfavourable comparisons? Alma, Emmie, Horace Kirkman, Wynyard Anstice, the four figures rose before his mental vision, and, as a suspicion of drowsiness came on, kept changing places towards each other as capriciously as if Puck might be expected to operate upon them. Some one in the family evidently must marry Horace Kirkman, Sir Francis thought. Now that all these hungry young Wests had to be provided for, some one must marry Horace Kirkman and act as conductor into family

channels of the Kirkman wealth, and the vast patronage that bullet-headed rogue of an old Kirkman had got hold of; but what a pity that the notion of securing the prize for quiet little Emmie had not occurred to anyone. It would have been great promotion for her, poor little soul, and she would have made a capital little conductor. Such quiet tears as those, and the sweet little wistful smiles that came when she tried to rouse herself out of them, would draw anything from any man, and she might have built up her brothers' and even her cousins' fortunes with perfect comfort to herself, without any of those qualms and disgusts that he feared would assail Alma. His Alma he began to think was almost worthy of the promotion of being reserved as the chosen companion of the years when he should have withdrawn altogether from public life, and taken to cultivating his literary tastes again. She might as well, with that object before her, marry Wynyard Anstice as not. Sir Francis thought that in those leisure days he should care a good deal for seeing Alma happy, and his heart quite warmed towards Wynyard, as he pictured him dropping in of evenings with Alma, and discussing points in that History of the Law of Inheritance he designed for the work of his old age, with such understanding and

interest as could only be expected from a man of Wynyard's intelligence and culture.

Alma married to Horace Kirkman, would be another thing. There could be no rational conversation with husband and wife there, and undoubtedly intellects were dulled in the course of time by constant companionship with fools. What a pity that those pairs of lovers could not change places once more. And with half recollections of a recent visit to a theatre where "The Midsummer Night's Dream" had been acted, and confused visions of playhouse fairies pressing Love in Idleness on Horace Kirkman's eyes, Sir Francis dropped comfortably into a deep sleep.

Emmie felt herself really alone for the first time since the news came, for the first time since she had left the bench under the magnolia-tree where she sat welcoming such a beautiful hope to her heart. Sir Francis would have been very much surprised if he had known the storm of feeling which raged within his apparently calm little companion (careful all the time not to disturb his repose by any restless movement) during the long night while he slept, and the train rushed through the darkness. It was not despair, or any keen sense of loss that made that night a never-to-be-for-

gotten passage through the valley of the shadow of death to Emmie. It was one of those mental struggles, such as only comes to natures capable of very deep love, from which, if the battle ends in victory, the soul rises up new born, dead to self and self-love, alive to all the higher kinds of devotion for evermore. A temple of God which, having known the horror and darkness of a sudden emptying, keeps the eternal light burning for ever afterwards on its altar. It was a struggle for surrender of the will only; for Emmie knew that there was no action possible for her, though at times for a few moments she let herself imagine impossible things, such as making an appeal to Wynyard not to desert her for Alma. She did not know why she felt so sure that his heart would turn back to Alma. Sometimes a pale hope lifted up its head and whispered that she too was young, she too was beautiful. She had loved with her whole soul, why should not she be chosen even with Alma by; but after listening to the voice for a minute, she told it to be still. Its sayings seemed to her beside the question after all, for what she wanted to think about was what would be best for him, what would make his life most complete. Had she not once seen him suffer, and felt then that she could give all the happiness and joy that might ever be

coming to her, to buy for him what he wanted? It was strange to feel so for an almost stranger; perhaps it was wrong, or perhaps that was only what one ought to feel for everybody. That white heat of love in which all sacrifice seemed joyful might be what we were meant to live and walk in, towards the common people of our lives; and then Emmie's heart bled to think that she had called her mother a common person, and doubted the possibility of joyful sacrifice for her and for the others. Saville Street life, with all its little anxious details and privations and ugliness came before her, looking darker than it had ever looked before, from contrast with the freer life she had tasted. She asked herself if she was ready to take up its burden again, on bruised shoulders too, for she fancied just then that in bidding good-bye to the love-dream which had come to her on that golden afternoon, she was shutting out all joy and strength from her life, shutting herself into prison.

Emmie put up her hand to feel for the little branch of quince-blossom that was still pinned by the cairngorm brooch out of sight under her shawl, and a great cry seemed to go out from her heart towards the giver of it. The moment in which his eyes met hers seemed a supreme moment whose claims outweighed all the obli-

gations of life, and was an existence in itself. She could not let go her hold on it. She could not come down from that height of satisfied emotion to the common path of duty again, could not resign herself to make or be made such a sacrifice, or submit to God's will, if that was indeed His will for her.

A hush of awe and compunction followed. The highest wave of passionate pain had flooded her struggling soul with that thought, and as it ebbed away, the dutiful instincts and habits that had always governed her reasserted themselves and proclaimed their mastery over passion. What was best for the others, not what would please herself, had always been her rule since very early days when she had first begun to take part in the cares of the straitened household, and gradually, through the surging of grief and pain, the old rule made itself heard again. It would be best for the others, if she came back with undivided interests, and gave herself wholly to share the struggle that was before them. He could not come into it—it would not be well for him to come into it because, Emmie decided sorrowfully, with keen remembrance of looks and words, he did not love her enough for that. She had pleased him for a moment at La Roquette, in the sunshine and among the flowers ;

but at home, with all the Saville Street household about her, and the work of the household pressing upon her, she could not be what he wanted. No; it was Alma he had preferred first. Alma was his real choice, and now that she had come back to him, as Emmie's instinct told her she had, there was nothing for *her* to do but to step aside out of the sunshine of their lives. She would not be even a remorse to him, not so much shadow as that upon their path. She would let him know somehow or other that she understood him rightly, and that those words, that look exchanged on the hill-side, meant for her no more than he would wish them to mean, after seeing Alma again. She would do that, and whatever pain there might be in her heart, there should be no anger or grudging, and she need never feel humbled in her own eyes or before her mother, who would never dream of a woman loving more than she was loved.

The night had worn away by the time Emmie had come to this resolution, and a cold dawn was creeping into the sky. Cold, for they were nearing Paris now, and had left the golden sunshine, and warmth, and flowers of the South far behind them. Magic land and glamour and dreams of love had vanished, and the long dark night had brought her up into the pale familiar world of work-

a-day life again. She hid her eyes from the faint yellow light, and the pale spring flowers that threatened to look hateful, and prayed, as she had never prayed before, for strength to make that sacrifice on which she had resolved, and to walk bravely henceforth in the thorny ways she knew.

Sir Francis, who woke up just as the prayer ended, hardly knew what to make of the countenance she turned towards him in answer to his sleepy exclamations. The gentle patience and sweetness on such a fair young face actually brought tears into his eyes, he found them so pathetic, and he patted her head affectionately after he had given her a morning kiss.

“That’s right,” he said, trying hard to find a pleasant topic to begin upon. “You have had a nice little sleep, I make no doubt, and so have I. It has done us both good, and here we are getting to the end of our night journey, and a cheerful sunny morning, which is always a comfort for the crossing, and for—hem—for the getting home and everything.”

“For papa’s funeral,” said Emmie. “To-day, yes I remember you said it was to be to-day ; we are hurrying home for that,” and she turned her head towards the window again, compunctious that she had been thinking

so little of her father, and yet unable for all her good resolutions to help a little grudge against the feeble yellow sunshine, which her uncle called cheerful, and which to her seemed a mere mockery and pretence, light without glow, awakening her to days from which joy would be always wanting.

They stopped for two hours' rest in passing through Paris, and Emmie vindicated her right to be called woman in her uncle's opinion, by giving some unnecessary trouble on this last opportunity and risking the loss of the train to Calais.

When Sir Francis came to the door of the bedroom where he had sent her to lie down, he found her seated before a writing-table scattered over with sheets of paper, and busy sealing an envelope, which the waiter, to whom he had entrusted his letters, was waiting to take.

"My dear," he said, impatient for the first time, "we shall miss our train, and you are delaying my letters. Why did you trouble yourself to write? I had said all that was necessary."

"I am sorry," Emmie answered humbly; "but this" (holding up an envelope) "has a ring in it which I took away from La Roquette by mistake. It is a present

intended for a girl in the village who is married to-day, and I thought I ought to send it back at once."

"Well, put on your wraps, there is not a minute to spare, and tell me meanwhile how to direct these other letters you are leaving on the table here."

"Never mind them, uncle; they are not intended to go anywhere, only sheets that I spoilt before I had finished."

Some of these stray sheets had only a few words scrawled on them, but the uppermost was signed, and had apparently been rejected only on account of two large tear blisters which disfigured the postscript.

As Sir Francis stood waiting till Emmie had repacked her writing-case and tied her hat, his eye ran over it, and he took in its contents without finding any other interest in what he read, than a faint surprise that Emmie should occupy herself in writing such a commonplace little note at such a time.

"DEAR MR. ANSTICE,

"I brought away Madelon's ring by mistake yesterday, and I have just remembered that this is her wedding-morning. I am sorry she will not have it to wear at the marriage, and, as I think I remember that

she was to leave La Roquette for a few days directly afterwards, I send the ring back to you that you may give it her when you see her again. Please don't say anything about me in giving it. She knows I wish her well, but it is not really my present, and I am thinking that it is not at all likely I should ever see her or La Roquette again.

“EMMIE WEST.

“P.S.—I took the branch of quince-blossom with me yesterday morning, but it died on the road.”

The yellow sunshine did not continue to vex Emmie's eyes through the journey. About noon the sky clouded over, and when they entered London a soft drizzle of rain was falling, making the wet flags and sooty trees of the squares they drove through, dismally familiar. It might as well have been a November as a May afternoon for anything they saw, except when a basket of dank primroses, poised on the drenched bonnet of a flower-girl, was obtruded into the cab window. Yet the sense of familiarity was lost in a growing awe as the distance from Saville Street lessened.

Dr. Urquhart had met them at the station, and his black dress and the little sentences he let fall during the drive brought the facts of her father's death and that this was his funeral day, home to Emmie in a way they had hardly come before. She began to realise fully that there would be a face and figure less in the familiar house she was approaching, a face she had been used to see there all her life, on which her eyes would never fall again; and it shocked her to hear Dr. Urquhart speaking of this absence as of something to which everyone at home had already grown accustomed.

"Aubrey," he said, "had come from school and was to have a fortnight's holiday before he went back again, and Mrs. West had promised to take tea downstairs that evening. Miss Moore, too, was returning from Zürich and might arrive to-morrow. Mildred had written on her own responsibility to beg her to come home; nobody quite knew why, since she certainly would not be wanted now. The worst time was over, Dr. Urquhart said he ventured to hope. It had been a very sad time, but the house would brighten up, and everyone feel better when once Miss West was in her right place among them all again."

Emmie turned her head away rather petulantly when

Dr. Urquhart said this. She meant, oh yes, she meant to get back into her old place, her right place, and do the best she could for them all, but he need not have said it with that smile of satisfaction lurking under his grave manner. It was not his place, she thought, with a little unreasonable anger, to hold up before her all the efforts she would have to make, and must begin to make, in another quarter of an hour. He need not have told her, at this overwhelming moment, that they all expected so much from her.

The hearse and the two carriages that were to follow it, were already standing before the door in Saville Street when the cab drove up, and the house was pervaded by the dreary bustle and solemn fuss that houses of mourning (even humble ones) cannot escape at such times.

Sir Francis felt greatly shocked when he perceived that the coffin was actually on its way downstairs as they entered the hall. It could not be helped. The afternoon was wearing away, and the undertaker's men were in a hurry and did not see why more time than was absolutely necessary should be given to such a poor show as this. Sir Francis would have drawn Eummie hastily into the dining-room to save her as much of the

sad encounter as possible, but she gently resisted his intention.

“Let me,” she pleaded, “let me go to meet it at the foot of the stairs. You know it is all of him I shall have seen, and I should like to say good-bye. I will not hinder the men more than a minute.”

Casabianca and the Gentle Lamb had been out that morning and spent the last sixpence of Mr. Anstice’s magnificent tip in buying at a little shop near, a dusty wreath of *immortelles* with “*Requiescat in Pace*” worked in black among the yellow flowers, to put upon the coffin. Emmie took two or three faded blossoms out of her bosom, and laid them in the centre of the wreath.

“Papa,” she whispered, leaning her forehead against the black pall as if she were whispering to the still form inside, “I will give them to you. I will not keep them to look at and cry over. I never gave you anything I cared about very much before; but with these to take away with you, you will understand that I am glad you are resting, and that I will try to think of nothing but comforting mamma and working for the younger ones, now you are gone—of nothing else.”

Mildred was waiting on the landing to seize upon

Emmie as she came up, and she carried her straight to her mother's room. Mrs. West gave a cry of joy and held out her arms, and, for a little while at least, Emmie did succeed in forgetting everything else in the caresses and tender talk that followed. Certainly no one wanted her so much as these, no one else needed her greatly. The thought had a sting of pain in it just now, but that would pass, and by-and-by she should find in it the comfort and rest it surely ought to give her.

“Mother,” Dr. Urquhart said that evening when all the bustle was over, and they were shut up in the drawing-room together; “well, mother, how do you think she is looking?”

“Very tired and out of heart, poor child.”

“Yes, yes, that one expects; but, mother, did you see that she was wearing the cairngorm brooch to-day? I caught a glimpse of it when we were driving in the cab; and when she came in to say good-night to you I made sure you must have seen it.”

“Yes, I saw it.”

“Well” (a little impatiently), “well, mother?”

“Oh, I understand what you are wanting me to say, Graham, but you shall not frighten me. I don't see how

there can be a doubt about it, after such a journey ; she is very much changed."

"Sweeter than ever—that's all."

"No, it is not all ; you had better let me say out my thought. Yes, she struck me as very much changed. She went away a child, and she has come back a woman ; and, Graham, my dear son, that does not happen in four months of a girl's life for nothing. Something has happened to alter her, to make her grow up all at once, and you have had nothing to do with it."

"How do you know that, mother ? You are more observing than I in most cases, I allow, but perhaps in this one, my own experience of the past four months may teach me something. Are absence and suspense nothing to change one and make one grow rapidly older ? Do you suppose that I have not been suffering ? No, I am not imagining that she cares as I do ; but even a little of what I have gone through lately would be enough to change any one. May it not be that ?"

Mrs. Urquhart shook her head.

"If you ask me I must tell you the truth, and I don't think it is *that*. I don't believe she wears my brooch to-day because I gave it her, or because it has anything to

do with you. She had forgotten that she had it on while she was talking to us."

"And you think someone else——"

"Nay, I did not say so; and now I wish I had held my tongue for to-night. We shall have time enough to judge before anything need be changed. You have quite decided that we take on the house for ourselves, and when it is ours they can fix a time for removal at their leisure; we shall be in no hurry to turn them out."

"Turn them out, mother!"

"Don't glare at me, Graham, as if I had said something preposterous. You can't imagine that I, who have gone through it all myself, would be hard on a widow and orphans! Mrs. West, poor thing, would be welcome to live in this house all the rest of her life as far as I am concerned, but she and her children must have their choice. The hardest thing of all sometimes is to force on helpless people obligations that they are perhaps wanting to escape from. You would not like Emmie to be driven into a corner and be obliged to take *you* whether she is ready for it or not, to put a roof over her mother's and brothers' and sister's heads?"

"Mother, you drive me wild with such a suggestion."

"It is a very obvious one, however, my dear Graham,

and must occur to every one directly you begin to talk of the whole family living on here permanently in your house. I only made it to show you the folly of rushing upon rash acts of generosity. If you want to be of real service, and to win Emmie round, you must let things take their natural course for a while, and wait patiently."

"Wait, and let the someone else you hint at win her from me. I had no idea you could be so unreasonable, mother; and all the while I am certain you are misjudging her, and that she put on the brooch to show——" but his voice grew shaky and he stopped.

"I wish we had not begun to talk to-night," said Mrs. Urquhart, penitently. "It has been a trying day, and we are both over-excited, and, I'm sorry to say, Graham, quite a pile of notes and letters have accumulated on your desk since morning. You had better go and look them over and calm yourself. As I said before, we have plenty of time. The question of moving will hardly suggest itself till the end of the quarter; we can let everything stand over till then, at all events."

Stand over! Dr. Urquhart walked off to his writing-table and his letters, convinced, as he had never felt before, that his mother was indeed getting old,

and losing the power of estimating the great events of life reasonably. She could plunge such a sword as that in his heart, could hint that Emmie's heart was preoccupied, and that at best she might be won round to take him as a *pis aller*, and she could then take up her knitting and advise him to go away and calm himself.

"Evidently," he thought bitterly, "it was not a matter of life or death to her; it would not make her world come to an end, if Emmie West slipped out of their lives altogether. She had even forgotten that such things ever were matters of life or death, on which all the world worth living for, hung."

As Dr. Urquhart broke open his notes, and read complaints and summonses from his patients to come and cure them, he doubted, for the first time in his life, of the dignity of a profession whose aim was to enable human creatures to live long enough to arrive at such a miserable state of apathy.

The effort of writing answers and planning the next day's work did him good, however, and so far mollified his feelings towards his mother, that when he came out from behind his curtain, he was glad to see her still sitting by the fire. His confidence had all died out now,

and given place to a burning indignation against the individual, a worthless idler, no doubt, who had been playing with Emmie's heart, and spoiling it for him, while he had been working so hard to deserve her, and he wanted to have his faith in himself and her, restored by another argument.

Mrs. Urquhart had waited for a last word, but her conscience would not let it be a concession to hope about Emmie.

"My dear Graham," she began, pointing to a page of her open Bible, "will you just look and see if the date written against that verse is in your father's handwriting? Ah yes, I thought so. We were reading here on the day of the last of those funerals before you were born, which emptied our house of all our little ones, and he marked it that I might remember. It's the answer of the Father in the parable to the eldest son: 'All that I have is thine.' I was in a very rebellious mood that night, not so much on my own account as on his, for he, I thought, deserved blessings if anyone did. He had been always diligent in the Father's service, and was he to have nothing of his own while other people, mere squanderers, had presents every day, calves and kids, and mirth with their friends? I broke out with this to him, and he just pointed to that 'all,' and

asked me if I did not think that *all* was better than a part. Gifts, something for oneself, are all very well for a time, he said, but still they are only a portion of the Father's wealth, and we do not give portions to those who are nearest us. The higher lot is surely to be let into possession of the 'all,' and have it, as the Father has it, in all. Not single gifts, but the root of joy, as it dwells in the Father, and so to be 'always with Him,' whatever happens. Yes, Graham, I know it is difficult to see things that way. One does not get into the first class in the school of the kingdom all at once, and for a long time the single gifts seem far the sweetest. Even the eldest son here, you see, did not understand what it was his Father had given him, but he was the eldest son, and he could not be robbed of his birthright, and allowed to be satisfied with a little, instead of all. I don't say one can help grudging sometimes, but if we could get rightly into our minds that success in getting what one wants is not always a mark of the highest favour—that there is something we can enter into beyond gifts—we should be less tempted to be angry when things go against our will. Don't you think so?"

Graham did not answer; his mother did not expect him to speak. It was not his way to let himself be

drawn into talk of this kind. She was quite content that he stood behind her in silence for a few minutes, and that when she got up to go to bed, he took the book from her and said :

“ I think I will look at that date in my father’s handwriting once more, if you don’t mind leaving it with me for to-night.”

CHAPTER II.

SUSPENSE.

As music and splendour
Survive not the lamp and the lute,
The heart's echoes render
No song when the spirit is mute—
No song but sad dirges,
Like the wind through a ruined cell,
Or the mournful surges
That ring the dead seaman's knell.

It is a common remark that the people who get the most pity are not the chief sufferers ; and it might be added as a parallel truism, that the pity, when it is bestowed, is seldom given for what the sufferers know to be their most pressing cause of sorrow. Our bitterest tears, our worst moments of pain, are so often given to complaints that have too much barefaced self-love in them to be presented before our critical fellow-creatures, or to be recognised quite nakedly by our own minds, even while we allow them in secret to draw tears of gall from our eyes. During the weeks that followed her father's funeral, it often troubled Emmie's conscience that she got credit for finer feelings than she deserved ; and that the people

about her would set down her silence and quietness and inability to share the outbursts of returning cheerfulness, that soon came to the other young ones, to the score of a deeper sorrow for the common loss, than her brothers and sisters felt.

Mildred, who had been grave and sad enough at first, was capable of being quite elated before the end of the week, over a legacy of old blank books, invaluable for scribbling her compositions, which Mary Ann turned out of one of her father's drawers. Even Harry gradually fell into his old ways, ran upstairs two steps at a time on the afternoon when he brought home the welcome news of his appointment as clerk in a new firm, to which Dr. Urquhart had introduced him, hummed a tune when he shouldered Katherine Moore's box, to carry it to "Air Throne" for the last time, and had a wrestling match with Casabianca on the evening before the latter went back to school. By degrees the old noises crept back into the silent house. The buzz and hum of active life began again with only one or two notes wanting, notes which, however, to some ears in the house made all the difference between dissonance and music in the tune wherewith Time was playing out those early summer days.

Dr. Urquhart was one of the dissatisfied people, though he had apparently less cause to complain than

anybody else, for the sounds he had hungered for during the last three months were in the house again, and met his ears as frequently as ever. He used to put down his pen two or three times in the evening, as had been his wont, to listen for Emmie's footsteps on the stairs, or her voice hushing Sidney and the Gentle Lamb when the school-room door opened below, and the old uproar again threatened to invade the drawing-room. No one could say that Emmie was not as nimble as ever in running up and down on everybody's errands, or that she neglected her post among the younger ones of the family in the evening; and yet, when the sounds he had listened for, ceased, Dr. Urquhart turned to his work with an impatient sigh, instead of the satisfied smile that used to provoke his mother. There was a semi-tone wanting—a spring of hope in the footsteps, a happy ring in the voice—that spoiled all the music to him. Perhaps only a lover who had taken it into his head to measure his own hopes by such symptoms as these, could have detected their absence, for Mrs. West was well content with her daughter's state of spirits, and believed that Emmie had brought as much sunshine back into the house as could be expected, or was desirable, under the circumstances.

Emmie herself hoped fervently that people would

soon leave off taking any particular notice of her, as nothing ever made her feel so much ashamed of herself as those looks of commiseration for a wrong cause. She was quite grateful to her mother for not observing the red rims round her eyes in the mornings, and she comforted herself with the belief that no one in the family, except perhaps Mildie, was at all aware of the fits of restlessness that seized her about post-time, and forced her to rush out into the hall and search the contents of the letter-box for a direction in Alma's handwriting, or for that possible reply to her Paris letter, whose chances of coming late, or early, or never at all, she blamed herself for calculating so incessantly.

When Sir Francis Rivers came, as he did for a hasty minute once or twice a week, to ask after Mrs. West and talk over business with Harry, Emmie was nervous about the sound of her own voice when she spoke to him. She quite hated the sharp, forced notes her ear detected in it whenever she brought out an inquiry after the travellers in the Basses Alpes; though, as she told herself, it would have been positively unnatural if she had shown no curiosity, and she had carefully considered every word beforehand, so that it should be no more and no less eager than became the occasion. She tried not to fancy that her uncle hurried

over his answers, and put her off with merely vague news; and yet more and more, as time passed on, a conviction grew upon her that, for some reason or other, Sir Francis did not like to talk about his wife's and daughter's doings just then, and that a kind of embarrassment came over him whenever the topic was brought up. Was it embarrassment, or was it only caution that laid a weight on his usually careless speech?

Emmie, who watched his face as closely as she dared, could not quite make this out. He smiled sometimes to himself, and his eyes twinkled, but, to Emmie's ear, there was a doubtful, nay, an ashamed sound in the tattoo which he generally beat loud with the fingers of one hand on the knuckles of the other, as he cut short his replies. "Ah, yes, yes, it has been a successful journey. Your aunt writes in much improved spirits." "And Alma?" "Alma does not write. It is your aunt who tells all the news there is to tell this time. I suppose I shall hear from Alma herself by-and-by." Or later: "Yes, they are quite well. They have gone on to Geneva, I heard this morning."

"So soon," said Emmie, in a breathless voice. "Then they have paid Madame de Florimel a very short visit at Château Arnaud. She invited us—my aunt, I mean, for a month."

“Well, I can’t quite make it out. Perhaps your aunt found it lonely up there in the mountains, or perhaps she and Madame de Florimel did not quite hit it off—two old ladies shut up together in an old castle on a rock, what could they do but come to blows? At all events, your aunt took the travelling-carriage on to Geneva, and I think, all things considered, she and Alma had better stay there for the present till matters arrange themselves a little.”

Emmie left off asking questions after that; but one day, a week later, Mrs. West—who had come downstairs to talk over Dr. Urquhart’s offer about the house with Sir Francis and Harry—detained Sir Francis when the business discussion was over to ask after her sister’s health, and in talking to her he grew more communicative than he had been before. Emmie felt thankful, more thankful than any one ever knew, that she was standing with her back to the speakers, so that no one could see how she looked while that conversation went on; and above all, she congratulated herself on the chance which brought Katherine Moore into the room, with a letter she wanted Harry to post, just as Sir Francis rose to take leave, for it was his two or three last sentences that overpowered her most nearly, and obliged her for a single second to put her hand on the chimney-piece, to still her trembling.

“ Oh, by-the-way,” he began, turning back from the door at which Katherine was entering, “ I meant to tell you that I parted with a friend of Emmie’s who desired to be remembered to her, or something of that kind, just at your door. I would not let him come in, as I had really only one spare half-hour to settle this business in, or he could have given you full particulars of the mountain journey, for he was with them all the time. Emmie will guess whom I mean—young Anstice. I had not seen him since his return to England till to-day. He hurried off at once to Scotland to Mrs. Anstice, and he has been very busy ever since bringing the poor woman back to Leigh, and arranging about her son’s funeral, for the body was washed ashore five or six days after the accident. What accident, do you say? Why, have not you heard? Ah! I beg your pardon, how should you have heard; it would hardly interest you just now, but to us—as an old friend of Frank’s—but I had better keep to the point. Young Anstice, whom Emmie knows, has lately come into possession of an earldom and a large property by the death of a cousin. The news reached him while he was travelling with my wife and Alma, and was, of course, a great surprise to them all. The poor young fellow who was drowned, was quite a lad. We knew him a little; he was at

Constance's wedding ; but it is the present Lord Anstice who was always a favourite with our young folks."

Emmie took her hand from the chimney-piece and steadied herself. If people would always for the future call him *that*, she need not be afraid of hearing him spoken of. She could bear to hear that name very well. It seemed to put La Roquette and their six weeks' intimacy very far away indeed, and even to give back to her remembrance unreprieved, the Wynyard Anstice whom no one would henceforth think or speak about in the old familiar way. She could have nothing to do with this new personage, or be tempted even to dream of disputing him with Alma. It was all over now, of course, and that little bit of his life at La Roquette when he was only madame's relation, and could talk of the mountain farm as a great inheritance, would be wiped out of everybody's thoughts but hers, and might be her possession still.

"Mr. Anstice. I remember him," Mrs. West was now saying, in a tone of gentle indifference. "We saw him several times last winter, and he seemed to take quite a liking to dear Aubrey. I am sure I am very glad he has come into a great fortune."

Sir Francis suddenly remembered that he was in a hurry, and bustled out of the room with a hasty apology

for brushing past Katherine Moore, who had paused in her talk with Harry West at the first mention of Mr. Anstice's name, and who now stood transfixed in the doorway, too much occupied with some thought of her own to notice his impatience. Emmie need not have been afraid of her own agitation being observed by any one, for it was Katherine's white face and startled expression that attracted Harry's and Mildie's wondering eyes towards her. She made an effort in a minute to recover herself, and boldly spoke out the thought she felt sure must have occurred to their minds as well as to her own.

"Anstice is a family name," she said, consideringly; "two or three families of cousins might well bear it. There is really no reason to suppose that the young nobleman, whose death in Scotland Sir Francis has just mentioned, has ever been seen by any of us. Christabel's acquaintance and mine must be an altogether different person. I really don't know why I thought about him just then."

"It's easily found out," said Harry.

"As you please," Katherine answered. "One naturally feels more interest in a person one has seen even once or twice than in a total stranger; and that Mr. Anstice was certainly kind in inquiring frequently

for me after my accident, and seems also to have shown some attention to Christabel while I was away. As the notion has occurred to us all, I think I should like you to find out the truth about it, and to let me know if you can."

The proud guarded tone was assumed rather to spare herself than in any way to deceive them. From the first hour of her return to Saville Street, in compliance with Mildred's telegram, Katherine guessed that it had been on Christabel's behalf rather than on their own, that the young Wests had wished for her presence in the house, and she felt sure that their uneasiness was founded on observations of facts to which she was a stranger; but miserable as had been the suspense of the last fortnight, Katherine had not yet brought herself to the pass of seeking information about Christabel's doings or feelings from any one but herself. She felt so sure each morning when she got up, that the anticipated burst of confidence which would restore their sundered souls to each other must come before another sunset, that she let the time slip by, day after day, unable to take a step that would make the hour of reconciliation less perfect when it came. "How," she asked herself, "would she succeed in comforting Christabel when she turned to her in an abandonment of renewed confidence, if she had to confess that

she had allowed any stranger to interfere between them, during the terrible eclipse of trust and love into which somehow or other they had wandered ? ”

There was no one in the house on whom the sense of change pressed so crushingly as on Katherine ; but till within the last day or two she had been trying to struggle against it, as in a half-sleep one struggles to throw off an oppressive nightmare. Could it be anything but a frightful nightmare dream that she and Christabel had met again after their first separation, and were no longer the same to each other as they had been ; could not get near to each other for some indefinite, but yet impenetrable barrier that every moment of the day and night kept them asunder ? For some time after her return, Katherine fought bravely to keep this conviction out. She met Christabel’s wandering looks with cheerful confident smiles. “ I am here,” she seemed always by every look and gesture to answer to the strange yearning in Christabel’s eyes. “ I am here ; what are you waiting for ? Let us begin our happy life together again ! ” She could not help a little impatience, a little angry disappointment creeping in, when, in spite of her presence and her watchful kindness, the wistful look grew and grew, and intensified to agony as the days passed on, till Christabel’s whole soul seemed to have gone out

in yearning expectation towards something unknown, leaving for Katherine only a dead blank. Katherine's pride as well as her love was wounded at last, but alarmed pride was another safeguard for silence, another barrier against letting anyone know what she suffered. If Christabel could not trust her, she would be none the less a faithful guardian to keep the trouble, whatever it might be, from being pryed upon by any less sympathising eyes than her own. The letter she had just brought downstairs was addressed to her friend Miss Douglas, at Zürich, and contained a resignation of her post as her secretary, giving as her reason that she found it impossible to persuade her sister to accompany her to Switzerland, and that she could not leave her alone just now when their old place of shelter was being broken up.

It had cost Katherine a sore struggle to write this letter. The half-hour given to its composition was perhaps the darkest and bitterest of her whole life—the time when the sense of defeat and failure entered into her very soul, and flooded it with dark waters of doubt and discouragement. And amid all the solid causes for regret arising from this decision, the thought that she was, for the first time in her life, writing an important letter without having talked out the matter confidentially with her sister, kept recurring, as, after all, the chief sorrow,

the crowning point of desolation. She was sacrificing all her hopes in life to a whim of her sister's, and Christabel had not even taken the trouble to understand what she was doing—could not be brought to give her mind long enough to see the injury her selfishness would inflict on the person she professed to love above all things. Katherine had made an appeal to her only that morning, and had tried to rouse her by showing her the folly of lingering in London till Miss Douglas had been driven to engage another secretary, or, if her patience held out, till their slender funds were exhausted, and it was no longer in their power to choose what they would do.

For a little while Katherine thought that Christabel was for once listening and being affected by her words. A shade of colour and emotion came into her face, which, with the exception of the hungry eyes, seemed lately to have stiffened into the semblance of a stone mask. She lifted her head, and every now and then her lips moved as if she were going to speak—yes, surely to speak out—to pour forth all the pent-up confidence at last. Surely she is touched at the thought of Katherine's anxiety—frightened, perhaps, as it dawns upon her that her obstinacy has risked so much that is of life or death moment to her sister. Gradually the regular noiseless motion of her lips and the turn of her head dispelled

these hopes, and Katherine discovered that Christabel was not listening to a word she said. She was counting the approaching sounds of the postman's knocks in his progress down the street. It was in proportion as this sound came nearer and nearer that colour and emotion grew into her face. The interest she was showing had nothing whatever to do with Katherine's pleadings. When the postman reached the next door but one, while tears of indignation were starting to Katherine's eyes, Christabel put up her hand to feel for something she wore under her dress, and a faint dreamy smile flitted across her face, the shadow of one of her old smiles, never seen now, but when she was listening for the postman. Katherine turned away at the sight to wipe her own burning tears, and did not observe how instantly the smile faded and how the hungry eyes darkened and grew for a moment wild with agony, when there was a longer pause than usual, and the next knock came on a door lower down in the street. That watching of all the London postal deliveries had now gone on increasing daily in intensity for three weeks, and it bewildered and scandalised Katherine too much to allow her to feel very compassionate towards the constantly-recurring disappointment. She thought she could not have remained dumbly expectant, letting all other interests and aims in

life fall away from her, for any love, for any personal desire whatsoever. It was such a contradiction to all their past hopes, such a downfall. If, after all, a woman like Christabel could be turned away from the aims in life she had set before herself by an idle fancy, by some poor unreal sentiment, then perhaps the battle she had thrown herself into, was not worth fighting, and she need not so very bitterly regret the fate that obliged her to confess herself defeated at the very outset.

It was in this mood she had written to Miss Douglas, and it returned upon her with fresh force when she got back to "Air Throne," and, finding it empty, sat down at Christabel's easel to finish the drawing of a wall-paper pattern, which had been left untouched so long that an active "Air Throne" spider had spun a web from corner to corner of the drawing-board. Very melancholy thoughts possessed her, as her fingers half mechanically deepened the faintly-outlined curves and leaves of the pattern, and she was forced to pause every now and then in her work because the gathering mists in her eyes hindered her from seeing clearly. Sometimes it was a bright recollection of "Air Throne," as it had looked last year, that nearly overcame her, and sometimes a dreary vision of the future, challenged her to face it and say if it was not to that or something like that they were surely drifting. She saw

herself toiling on without the high hopes that had hitherto given her such an untiring appetite for work. She saw Christabel indifferent and preoccupied, falling further and further away from her under some alien, nay, perhaps, degrading influence ; she saw them both sinking into great straits of poverty till their lives became like the lives of so many solitary working-women, a dire daily struggle for the means of living, and for nothing beyond that—they who had set out so proudly.

Katherine allowed her hands to fall idly into her lap, feeling too spiritless even for the mechanical task she had set herself, till she heard Christabel's steps reascending the attic stairs, and then she again took up her pencil and began to draw. It might perhaps, she thought, rouse Christabel to some sense of shame for her long idleness, if, on coming into the room, she saw the easel drawn into its old place by the window again, and her sister employed in finishing her neglected work. For a moment Katherine hoped that her little device was successful, for Christabel walked straight up to the easel and, standing behind her, put a hand on her shoulder. Evidently she is preparing to speak, but anxious not to be looked at while she begins the long-delayed communication ; at last it is coming then—at last she will break the long silence. Something has moved her, and she will

explain her strange conduct and throw herself on her sister's indulgence at last.

“Katherine, did you hear anything when you were downstairs, about—about—Mr. Anstice?” Christabel's dry lips murmured in a hoarse whisper close to Katherine's ear. “They were talking about him just now, as I passed the downstairs sitting-room—Harry and Mildred—for I heard his name, and they cannot know anything about him more than I do. You must go down and find out for me what they are saying. They have no right to have heard anything about him when I have not. It cannot concern them, you know.”

“Nor us,” said Katherine, coldly, “as far as I understand; it has never been our habit to trouble ourselves about common acquaintance who do not seek us. We have other work on our hands, and I should be ashamed of asking such a question of Harry and Mildie.”

She was half vexed with herself for answering so coldly; but the question, coming just when she had hoped for something else, had been a great disappointment, and in resuming her work she had suddenly discovered that the pattern traced on the board was composed of an endless interlacing of four letters—C and M and R and A—now disposed so as to outline two hands joined at the finger-tips, and now a double flower,

and now two hearts enclosed in a lily-cup. The discovery did not dispose her to listen calmly to questions about Raphael Anstice just then; and when, after a few moments' silence, Christabel stooped down imploringly and touched Katherine's cheek with her hot lips, in the first voluntary caress she had offered since her return, Katherine turned away her face irresponsible. With those intertwined letters before her eyes, revealing, as she felt they did, much in her sister's life of which she had been kept in ignorance, the caress seemed a Judas kiss—a kiss of betrayal. A faint moan, such as a wounded animal struck by a careless hand might have given, fell on Katherine's ear and grieved without melting her. The suffering seemed so exaggerated, as well as so misapplied, while there were plenty of nearer troubles to grieve over which Christabel was bringing on herself, that she could not pity it as perhaps it deserved to be pitied. She felt like a block of ice, and had an instinct that the delayed confidence had better not come at this moment, for she could be cruel towards a confession of love-folly to-day.

Finding no response, Christabel turned from the easel and began to pace up and down the room. Katherine's rejection of her caress startled her. During the past anxious days, while hour by hour she had been

expecting news of her husband, and finding instead a strange baffling silence growing round her, Katherine's presence in the house had given her a certain comfort, and it had not occurred to her as a very important matter that her own conduct should remain unexplained so long. She was only waiting, and at any moment the necessity for silence might end. He would come back to her, or the answer she was expecting to her letters would be put into her hands, and would sanction her sharing the joy it would give her with Katherine. Intense, overwhelming anxiety had blotted out her remorse for her conduct to her sister, and she had been turning in her agony to thoughts of the old love as the one solid bit of ground left for her existence to rest upon. The action that denied her the touch of Katherine's cheek was as the crumbling of the universe round her—a crack of doom. She could not get her thoughts coherently enough even to complain or remonstrate aloud. Katherine would not kiss her; Katherine, like everything else, was vanishing from her into the darkness thickening round her hour by hour. Was it “Air Throne” in which she was walking—was that her easel at which Katherine sat with the drawing upon it she began to trace, surely not so long ago, when *he* stood by, applauding her devices?

Whenever Christabel's back was turned, Katherine

looked up wistfully from her work and watched her till she reached the end of the room, but she avoided seeing her face, and looked down on the board whenever Christabel's eyes were on her. It was one of those terrible duels of silence which people who love each other very much fight sometimes to the infinite wounding of their own souls. If they speak, they know they must utter words of reproach that can never afterwards be forgotten—for what reproach is so keen as the reproach of intimate love—or throw themselves with entire abandonment on each other's hearts. Unready for either course, a dumb, awful suffering holds them in suspense, building up a wall between them that each moment seems more insurmountable. If it had not been for those intertangled C-M's, and R-A's before her eyes, Katherine would have given in; but the sight of them as they revealed themselves again and again in every curve of the pattern she was tracing, steeled her heart and warned her away from speech. Contempt for the infatuation that had found pleasure in expressing itself so aimlessly, would have forced itself out, if she had allowed words to come.

It grew too dark to draw while the cruel silence lasted; and Katherine, glad to escape what was becoming intolerable, pushed away the easel, and, taking down her

bonnet and cloak from the wall, got ready to go out. She had long had it in her mind to visit David Macvie, whom she had not seen since her return, and now a half-formed resolution to take him into her confidence and consult him about her fears, gave a new interest to her project. Christabel stood still and watched Katherine's preparations, in a frightened silence. To her highly-wrought mood it seemed that if Katherine went out without speaking to her, it would be a sign that she was irrevocably offended and would never love her again as she used to do. She had no doubt discovered all her deceit and weakness, and found it quite contemptible, quite unpardonable, as perhaps he, too, did when, in absence, he saw it in its true colours. When Katherine's hand was on the door, she started forward, and laid hold of her dress to keep her back.

"Don't go!" she cried. "Oh, Katherine, I want you. It is getting dark; I want you to stay at home."

The voice sounded sharp and fretful, like the voice of a spoilt child, and Katherine felt really annoyed, and for the first time ashamed of her sister.

"I have been waiting for nearly an hour for you to begin to speak to me," she said, coldly, "and now I really must go out, and you had better keep what you have got to say till I come back, when we shall both be

in a better mood for it, perhaps. It is absolutely necessary for one of us to work. If you won't rouse yourself and attend to the ordinary affairs of life I must."

Christabel stood for a moment looking intently in Katherine's face, and then throwing the dress she held from her with a gesture which Katherine took for anger, but which was in reality despair, she turned her back upon her, flung herself in the chair by the easel and hid her face. She had read contempt in Katherine's eyes, and she felt all was over for her. If Katherine despised her; if the love that had hitherto been indulgence itself to her, condemned her, then there was indeed nothing more to hope from anyone else.

Katherine lingered a while, and then went out. She had been used to say that it was quite impossible for herself and Christabel to quarrel, and this old boast came back with a sharp sting into her mind during her solitary walk. She felt, that to people who loved each other as they two had loved, small beginnings of discord, a rejected kiss, or a delayed confidence, were more deadly injuries to affection than taunts and reproaches where the bond had been less perfect. Could such things, between such lovers as they, having once occurred, be ever so completely forgotten—as that the former fearless trust could be restored. Remorse soon drove out the short-

lived anger ; yet Katherine did not hasten back to the house. On the contrary, she lengthened out the small pieces of business she had determined on carrying through ; and when she reached David's shop, long after dark, and found him out, she asked permission to wait in the little back sitting-room till his return. It was a new thing to her to linger abroad, because she dreaded what awaited her at home, and a reluctance to go back unprepared for what she might have to hear, grew upon her, as she sat listening to the clocks, in the little room Christabel used to describe so gaily a year ago. She felt half afraid that Christabel might take her long absence for a sign of resentment, yet she could not make up her mind to go away without giving herself the chance of hearing something from David that would enlighten her perplexities.

CHAPTER III.

CHRISTABEL.

Ach neige,
Du schmerzenreiche
Dein Antliss gnädig meiner Noth.

CHRISTABEL did not uncover her face for long after Katherine left the room. She heard the door close, and listening to the footsteps along the passage and down the creaking attic stairs, each step hurt her as if it had been made upon her heart; and her heart responded with a dull throb of yearning after something that was receding from her to a great, great distance. She had said to herself, when she covered her eyes, that she would never meet that look of contempt in Katherine's again—never, it would kill her. Since the dawn of self-consciousness, she had been used to think of herself in accordance with Katherine's thought of her, to see herself clothed in Katherine's love and good opinion; and now contempt from her seemed

to make life impossible. Before the echo of Katherine's last footstep had died on her ear, she had settled it with herself that she would not see her sister again, till she could come with her husband by her side, to tell the whole truth and plead for forgiveness. He would explain and excuse their conduct to Katherine, for had he not conquered her own scruples, and was it not his business now to defend her? The long suspense and intense concentration of all her thoughts on one subject had weakened Christabel's brain; so that she could no longer think clearly, or understand the real difficulties of her position. All other considerations receded into the background, before dismay at the bewildering spell of silence that seemed to have fallen upon her from the moment she returned to Saville Street, a happy bride,—as she had believed herself then,—parted only for a little while from her husband.

For the first week after her return, the letters sent to the address her husband had given her, were happy trustful letters, full of details of all that was happening in the West family, interspersed here and there with more personal matters, with deeper thoughts, and tenderer fancies, than she perhaps would have found courage to speak, if her husband had been by her side. It was very strange and sweet to her to be opening up to him

these innermost recesses of her heart and mind, which no one but Katherine had ever looked into before, and which some latent fear of meeting an irresponsive look had closed from him hitherto. Her three weeks' husband had a right to know everything about her now; and these mind-revelations so absorbed Christabel for a day or two, and so fully occupied all the time that was not needed by the Wests in their trouble, that her longing for answers to her letters did not go beyond a very bearable pain. She knew that both her letters and her husband's replies passed through an intermediate hand, and in the hurry of their parting, she had forgotten to inquire how long their transmission would take.

For a little while she had stilled her disappointment each day, by picturing the rich feast that would come by-and-by. But when once she began to realise the strangeness of the long silence, her anxiety for news became almost maddening. Hour by hour, minute by minute, she felt as if another atom was added to the load of dread suspense, another grain of sand thrown down on the heap of accumulated silent hours, that put the hope of ever hearing further away, and seemed to build a wall of helplessness about her. The task of writing her own daily letter, that had begun by being such a delight,

changed gradually to the worst torture of all. She had made every appeal she could think of, urged every plea, implored for a word—an angry word even, rather than silence—and it had been like crying out into thick darkness, and getting back not even an echo of her own passionate entreaties. A sense of humiliation came with the repetition of this urgency. It was the first time in her life that she had begged for a word from anyone, and nothing but the maddening of suspense could have brought her to plead so long for notice that was withheld. At last her letters dwindled down to a word or two each day which changed in tone as, at the moment of writing, hope, or dread, or short-lived resentment had the upper hand in her tempest-tossed soul. And now for three days she had not written at all. A numbness, the result of intense suffering, was stealing over her, and for three days she had been flattering herself that if she kept quite quiet, if she left off questioning even with herself, or accusing her husband of unkindness in her thoughts, the explanation she was hungering for, would come as the reward of her patience. They had spoken together about patient Grizell once, when she was drawing some illustrations for a volume of Chaucer's poems, and they had had an argument about the rightfulness of the wife's yielding so much

to her husband's will, he having, all the while (as she knew), the question of her yielding to his wish for concealment uppermost in his mind. It had apparently been a playful word struggle, but each knew that thoughts of deepest import to them both underlay their argument, and in the end she had yielded. Perhaps with a too reluctant acquiescence to satisfy him, she thought now, and he was trying her further, preparing her, in the fashion in which Grizell was prepared, for that joyful revelation, at which he had been so fond of hinting mysteriously while they were together.

For three days Christabel had been trying to put her agony to sleep with this fancy, and when Katherine talked about their removal to Zürich, her words sounded quite idle and meaningless. She could not give her mind to such a question, when perhaps the postman on his road down the street, held in his hand the glad reprieve that would be the end of all care. If her husband had said to himself that he would wait to write till she had left off urging him, surely, he would think the patience of three days enough proof of submission. He never waited three days, she remembered, when she used to urge upon him not to call too often in Saville Street; and oh, how grateful he had once been to her, for acknowledging that she had found the time long

when they had missed each other on two successive mornings in her walk to her work.

The shock she received from hearing the name of Anstice spoken in mysterious tones downstairs, and from Katherine's manner of receiving her first attempt at confidence, startled her from this dreaming to a sudden realisation of the true facts of the case. When once she had admitted the possibility of putting an end to the suspense herself, she could not bear to let the thought go again. If he accused her, when they met, of taking it upon herself too soon to act against his wishes, she could make him understand what an eternity the three weeks' suspension of all intercourse had been to her. She could go back and recount to him each day's history, and show the wound which the striking of every hour in it had made in her heart. The project that had occurred to her as most likely to relieve her anxiety quickly, was to make a journey to the little northern town to which she had been told to send her letters, and to inquire at the address given her there as to whether such letters had been received and sent on, and whether any answers awaited her. She knew the place, for she had spent a day and a night there with her husband, and it was at that time that he had nearly told her his secret. She forced herself now to recall the stages of their homeward

journey, and calculated the probable expense of a railway ticket; and then she took out from the drawer of her writing-desk the little purse she had used on her journey. Fortunatus's purse, which her husband had filled for the last time when they parted, and she emptied the coins it contained into her lap to see if there was enough for her purpose. Yes, there was enough—more than enough. She was richer than she thought, for she had put away the purse on the evening of her return without examining it, and had not had the heart to look at it since. As she put the money back again, she calculated that she might even go on to Scotland, if her first attempt at getting news failed. Yet it could not quite fail; she must surely, on the spot to which her letters had gone, gather some tidings to account for the delay. Merely to question a person who was in direct communication with him, and could be made to answer her with a living voice and thus break the horrible spell of silence, seemed, just then to Christabel, motive enough for the journey. At the worst, it was escape from Katherine's eyes, from the agony of counting the postman's knocks through another day, while Katherine watched her coldly, and thought contemptuously of her folly.

The prospect of immediate action comforted her so

much that she was able to write a coherent note to her sister, telling her where she was going, and promising further explanation of her conduct in a day or two; and then she put up a few clothes in a hand-bag and got herself ready for the journey. She shut the attic windows while busy about her preparations, to keep out the sound of the late postman's knocks on the neighbouring street-doors, for she was determined not to prepare another disappointment for herself, now, when all suspense would soon be over; but just as she was leaving her room, the sound to which her ears had become abnormally sensitive, reached her. Her heart gave a great bound as usual, and she was obliged to lean against the doorpost for an instant, once more startled into concentrating her entire being into an act of strained attention, into feeling as if her whole body had become a throbbing, listening ear. This time the sounds came in the succession she had imagined so often, that she could hardly believe in their reality now. A loud knock at their door; steps in the hall of someone coming to search the letter-box; a lengthened rustle as if some larger packet than usual were being abstracted; then quick footfalls mounted the stairs higher and higher, past the Land of Beulah, past Emmie's bedroom door, on to the creaking attic staircase:—it was Mildie who was coming up, and

Christabel, reassured and courageous, went forward to meet her.

“ Here,” she said, cheerfully, “ here is the letter you have been expecting so long. See what a thick one to make up for the long delay. I am very glad it has come, for I began to think that a craze for expecting letters that were never coming, had got into the house. Here is yours, at all events.”

Mildie had the consideration to run away when she had fulfilled her errand, and Christabel walked back to “ Air Throne ” with the thick packet in her hand. It was too dark in the passage to read the address on the cover, and she was not in any hurry ; only one person in the world would send her a thick letter like this. She was glad to take a minute or two to rest her mind in the sweet certainty of relief, of actually holding what she had longed for, in her hand, before the intense moment came of opening the cover, seeing the familiar handwriting, and devouring his very words.

The light from the window only showed her the Thorpe Leigh postmark and an unknown hand on the cover ; that she expected, for she had understood the letters were to pass through an intermediate hand, and this budget must contain the accumulation of all he had written during the past long weeks, detained in someone’s

careless custody. Would that someone's neglect ever be pardoned when her husband knew what it had cost her, that it had even made her, now and then for a moment or two, doubt his love? Christabel could afford to call it a moment or two, and to smile pityingly at herself as she lighted the lamp, and then settled herself by the table to enjoy her feast.

A number of letters fell out as she tore off the cover. She picked one up, and then another, and threw them down with a terrible sense of bewilderment. They were her own letters; some of them had evidently been read, but the greater part remained in sealed covers. When she had glanced through the first to find some mark or written word that might throw light on the mystery, she tore off the unbroken envelopes and drew forth still other and other sheets, scattering them about and searching wildly for some writing not her own, for a page that did not return her tender or entreating words mockingly to her strained eyeballs. At last she found a sheet written only on one side in a clear, round hand, which made the words easy to decipher, while their meaning floated over her brain in a thick cloud of utter bewilderment, part of a puzzle to which as yet Christabel had found no clue.

“The lady who has been in the habit of writing to

the late Lord Anstice under the name of Ralph Anstice, Esq., is requested not to send any more letters to the Lodge, Thorpe Leigh. The enclosed, most of which reached Thorpe Leigh after the news of his lordship's lamented death had been received there, came into our hands a few days ago, and the writer is assured that so much only of their contents has been examined as was necessary for their safe return into her possession. If Miss Moore wishes for further information on any point connected with Lord Anstice's decease, or has any communication to make to his solicitors, she is to communicate with the address in London given above. A newspaper containing an account of Lord Anstice's death, and one with a notice of his interment in the mausoleum at Thorpe Leigh, will be forwarded per next post."

Christabel read this letter twice through, and then sprang to her feet again; the thought which had been prominent in her mind before she received this packet, recurred vividly. She would not accept *this* as the end of her anxiety; it was all some wild mistake, a plot to keep her and her letters from him. He could not be dead. He who had left her so full of life and strength three weeks ago. He could not be dead without her

knowing it, or if—for the terrible thought knocked loud at the door of conviction, and tried hard to force itself into her mind—if he were dead—what was there left for her to do, but to go and die with him? She was wasting her time there. Katherine would come back and stop her. Christabel felt as if her only chance of escape from madness lay in instant action, in giving herself a loophole for hope, by saying that there was something to be ascertained yet, that this ghastly explanation which had come, could not be the true one. She would fight against believing it, to the last.

She left the letters on the table and the lamp burning. Katherine might read and discover all now if she pleased, and she hurried out of the house, meeting no one on the stairs but Sidney, who remembered afterwards that he had been startled by her white face and the gesture with which she had put him away, when he tried to speak to her. The wind blowing in her face, for it was a fresh night, brought for the moment a wonderful sense of relief and returning vigour. She felt as if, in escaping from the house, she was leaving the misery of the last three weeks, with this crowning agony, behind her. She was going to find out the truth for herself; and there must be some alleviation in it for her, something more of him, than that blank horror which had been

thrust into her face so suddenly to-night. She should see the people who knew all about him face to face, and make them tell her something else. The way she took on her walk to the railway-station was so full of recollections of him, brought back so many pictures of him strong and young and full of childlike gaiety, that every step furnished her with fresh arguments against believing him dead.

He the Lord Anstice who lay buried already in some distant mausoleum! She could almost have laughed aloud at the thought, while she walked past the lamp-post where they had talked of their first meeting, and exchanged their first look of love, she and her young artist lover. She hurried on through the dark railway-arch,—so full of recollections of him—but she was obliged to pause for breath at the foot of the steps that led to the railway-station above; and, as she stood still for a minute looking down the vista of the long street where they had walked together on Christmas-eve, the tinkling of a tambourine and the sound of a voice singing in the square below, reached her. Yes, there was a child dancing and singing under the trees of the square-garden, just as on that evening; only now it was a little Italian boy with active bare feet and elf-locks, who sent the foreign words of a gay little song through the summer English

air, giving an aspect of remoteness, so it seemed to Christabel's highly-wrought mood, to the old familiar street. Would people dance and sing if he were dead? Christabel thought she would tell him all about this evening scene when they met; how she had stood forlornly wondering and comparing it with that other time, and how dreary and visionary it had seemed without him. Perhaps she would make a picture of it, as she had done of that other singing scene, while he stood by looking over her shoulder.

She heard when she entered the station that the night mail to the north would start in a few minutes, and she had only just time to secure a ticket and hurry on to the platform, before the whistle sounded. The next minute she found herself shut into a first-class carriage, and luckily, as she thought at first, alone.

The rapid motion of the train bearing her onwards to the attainment of her object brought a sense of satisfaction at first. This sustained her for an hour or so, till London streets were left far behind, and they had emerged out of smoke, and noise, and squalid suburban buildings, among quiet green fields and hedgerows, and distant prospects of solitary homesteads where the summer twilight lay muffling all things in soft grey

repose, a dewy dimness, that minute by minute, as the scenes flew rapidly past, deepened into the darkness of a moonless night. The thickening shadows fell with a terror and chill over Christabel's excitement, calming her down, but as if with a heavy oppressive hand laid upon her, to crush out life and hope. As the night and the solitude deepened, and the silence intensified round her, she felt as if successive veils of illusion were stripped from her mind, leaving her face to face with herself, as she had never stood before, in all her life.

The bright fancies that had been her companions from childhood, and which had seemed far more real than herself or any outward object, looked back at her for a moment with farewell yearning faces, letting her know that she was exiled from their world for ever. They had all merged themselves into a golden, glowing atmosphere surrounding one shape, and with the going down of that sun, they too would vanish for ever, leaving her alone, alone in the alien world of bitter hard fact; let down into bare existence, amid terrible crushing realities, to face herself there—a shrinking naked self, stricken helplessly through and through with cold and despair. Katherine's love alienated and turned into contempt by conduct she could no longer explain or

defend; her husband dead without having acknowledged her; herself—her life given away and lost—for, bit by bit, the various events and circumstances that she had seen hitherto under false halos of feeling or fancy, arranged themselves with pitiless significance, and she understood clearly what she had done, and what had happened to her. The letter, which she had read twice, came back with no cloud over its meaning now, no possibility of escaping the terrible certainty it brought.

She found it as impossible now to doubt that her husband was dead, as it had been impossible to believe it an hour before. She began even to think that she had known it all along, and that the utter silence and blankness that had surrounded her, during the last three weeks, could not have been felt by her if he had been in the world anywhere, even keeping silence towards her. His heart would have responded to her heart; there would have been a vibration of the chords if he had been anywhere within mortal reach; nothing but his death could have made her so utterly lone and cold. And he had gone, too, without leaving a word for her. “Miss Moore,” the name in the clear handwriting came before her eyes again as if it had been written in fire. There had been no word about her then on his death-bed, nothing to break the dead blank, the silence

which had become already intolerable. She should never know if she had offended him by any word in her letters, never know if by chance there had been a thought of love for her in his mind when he died; never, unless she could follow into the blank silence where he was gone, and perhaps find him there, and ask him, standing face to face with him once more.

Christabel feebly wrenched herself away from the growing, dangerous fascination of that thought, and tried to turn her mind to something else. What had she done in coming here? Where would she find herself, when the train stopped in the early morning? What was she travelling towards? A grave, a closed grave, a mausoleum guarded in some stately park where she should be denied a right to enter. That was all there was left to her—a grave she could not establish her right to weep over, no, not with Katherine. She might tell her long story, but who would believe it now, perhaps not even Katherine? Had she not lost herself, and in reaching out towards a new happiness, fallen through into nothingness, nameless, and fameless, cut off from all that held her to life? The dark hours of the night passed while thoughts of this nature surged through Christabel's brain, billows and great waves of trouble going over her head, and she raised no cry for help to any Power above.

She let herself drift before the dark bitter waters, knowing that they were bearing her on to a purpose, to a dark descent that lay near, and which the longer she allowed herself to contemplate its proximity, grew more fascinating, as promising, at least an end, a solution of all difficulties.

The first faint streak of dawn that crept chill and pale into a rainy sky, pierced her with a fresh dart of pain, stinging her into quicker thought and urgency of resolution. It must be done in the dark, if it was done at all. A step out into the dark would be so much easier, and then there would be an hour or two for the crushed body to lie still, wherever it might fall, and grow stiff and cold before stranger eyes came to look at it, or stranger hands to touch it. Christabel had never feared pain or discomfort in her life, and that part did not trouble her. She had been used to live half out of her body in a world of dreams, unconscious of many things that would have been painful to others; and bodily suffering, the momentary bodily suffering of such a swift death, had no terror for her just then. Katherine would be sorry, but she would go back to Zürich unfettered, to the friend who valued her and sympathised with her aims; and in successful work and gratified ambition forget this summer's sorrow sooner,

perhaps, than if *she* lived on a dead weight and perpetual reminder of failure. For herself—in another moment she should know where *he* was, and what he felt about her now. It was the only swift way of getting at a knowledge which seemed to Christabel to sum up all desire—whether he loved her yet, and how it was that he had kept silence to her at the last, and not called her, as surely he might have done, to come after him.

She moved close to the window and let down the glass. There was just light enough now to see that the train was passing between high grassy embankments, from the top of which came a faint scent of new-mown hay and dying flowers. A quiet enough resting-place where she might lie perhaps unseen and untouched for hours. She turned the door-handle and found it yield to her touch, and then, just as she was about to take a step forward—for she intended no haste, only to walk out into the faint morning—she heard or thought she heard a voice calling her—Christabel! Christabel! It was so loud and clear, that she turned round and seeing no one, only the empty carriage, showing its emptiness clearly in the growing light, she sank back into the seat she had left, trembling from head to foot, and startled out of her dreadful purpose into another state of consciousness. Christabel! The sound came to

her again, but now it was a soft whisper as of some one speaking in her ear, tenderly and imploringly. The tones carried her back years and years, till she felt as if she had got quite away from the lonely self that had so frightened her, and was a little child again called to stand by her mother's side. She felt as if she were leaning against her mother's knee, and listening to some words she had not thought about for long years, but which came back to her now, as an oft-repeated saying of her mother's to her: "Christabel, beautiful for Christ." She could not remember whether her mother had thought her name meant this; or whether she had been in the habit of telling her it was this she meant her to be, when she gave her the name Christabel,— "beautiful for Christ." And she had not thought of it in all these years. Was it true? Was there Some One—above and beneath all—who cared for her, and was so with her every moment, underlying all her life, that the utter loneliness, the bare selfhood which had terrified her a little while ago, was only another of her illusions, an unreality which was now being stripped off, to show her at last the true secret of life, which she had missed in all her dreams? The dawn kept creeping on, making visible swiftly-changing pictures of rain-gemmed grass blades, and dripping trees, and cattle in distant meadows stand-

ing up to greet the daylight, and birds stirring and piping to each other in the wet hedgerows. The morning had come, weeping and sad, but full of life, and patient, still sweetness. The night was passed and with it the dark temptation to which Christabel had so nearly yielded. She had no vivid sense of escape, and as yet no conscious remorse; she lay back in the seat not caring even to shut the door, though the rain came in and drenched her dress. The power of thinking and feeling vividly seemed to have gone from her, and for a time she felt nothing but the sense of a loving presence all around her, and a glad conviction that the isolation which had almost driven her mad was all a mistake; a greater unreality than any of her former fancies. They indeed were shadows; but there was something, Some One beyond the seen, where she, even she, a vain dreamer who had missed her way, could be at home. She need not get out of the body to seek it, for it was here.

Gradually the light as it grew stronger seemed to gather itself into a form, a face that bent over her—her mother's face—Katherine's—*his*—for a little while the likeness changed from one to another, looking at her always with eyes of love; but at last it resolved itself into a grander image, whose face, while it had a likeness to all that she had ever loved or dreamed of as beautiful

or desirable, far transcended all her thoughts. All perception of outward things faded, as her inward eyes were intent on this vision, and as she went on looking, a sense of familiarity, of old and new acquaintance, blended in it and grew upon her. Not her mother, not Katherine, not *him*, not anyone of the dream creations she had imaginatively loved for their beauty and nobleness, but a familiar Friend nevertheless, closer than any of them, who had been with her, unheeded all the time, supplying the root of her life.

“Did you not know me, my child?” the lips and eyes that were all love seemed to say to her. “You have thought the thoughts that I inspired. You have spoken My words; you set forth to fight on My side in the battle against evil, and yet you forgot Me, and have often gone near to deny Me, while I was standing by your side and giving you the strength to speak and think; a love which you took to be your own. Look at Me now, and see if I am not better than the images that have hid Me from you so far.”

And then Christabel, yielding to a guiding impulse, followed herself in vision backwards through the years of her life, and behind all its true struggles, prompting all its higher yearnings, she saw this love on which she had turned her back, but which had been drawing her all the

time. And, as she looked, the loving voice said to her softly from time to time :

“ Ah, if you had only known, if you had looked at Me, how I could have helped you ; how strong, how wise you might have been. You could have afforded to wait patiently for the human love, if you had known what arms were around you, and that it was on everlasting love that your life was built up.”

The daylight grew stronger and stronger, and the roadside stations began to show signs of activity. Faces appeared at the carriage-windows when the train stopped, and voices of this world, speaking on common topics, pierced through Christabel's vision, and brought her back to a recollection of where she was, and to the necessity of rousing herself to meet the urgent calls of the day ;—the new day that had begun for her, as well as for the rest of the world.

A guard came to shut the carriage-door on the first stoppage after daybreak, and cast an inquiring look on Christabel's white face and rain-drenched garments. And when the train waited for an hour soon afterwards, he appeared again, benevolently bringing her a cup of coffee, and asked to see her ticket.

Thus put upon the defensive, Christabel made a great effort to collect her thoughts ; her eye fell on the name

of the station at which they were waiting, and it appealed to her memory, and helped to steady her mind and bring her to decide on a plan of action. She recollected that she had stopped at this town on her former journey, and that it was only a few stations from the village to which she had taken her ticket; and when the guard returned for the coffee-cup at the end of an hour, she was able to question him. She ascertained that the early train stopped at the junction three miles from Thorpe Leigh, and that there was usually an omnibus to meet it.

The man seemed relieved to find her willing to talk, and at the name "Thorpe Leigh" grew communicative.

"Was the lady going to the Great House?" he asked, with a glance at Christabel's dress, that chanced to be a black one.

No doubt she knew all that had happened there lately. It was just a fortnight since there had been a grand funeral train at the junction she was going to get out at, sent to meet the body of the poor young lord, drowned in Scotland, that had travelled by the up night mail from the north, to be buried in the mausoleum at Leigh. A great show it was, and plenty of mourning-coaches to follow the hearse, but most of them were empty. There was no one left in the place—no relation,

that was to say, to follow the corpse to the grave. It had been a great deal talked of in those parts.

Did he know the place? Christabel asked, encouraged by the interest in his face. Had he ever seen the—the gentleman whose dead body had been brought to the junction?

Well, not often; he did not know him to speak to, the man told her, but he was a native of these parts, and a cousin of his had lived in the Great House in the old lord's time, and kept the village inn at Thorpe Leigh now, a pleasant quiet little place, where folks went sometimes for their health in summer. The young lord himself was fond of stopping there, and used to tell his cousin that he felt it more home-like than the big house. Oh yes, he was well liked by those who knew him, and there were plenty of the poorer sort who were very sorry to hear of his death; but there was not anyone to be called a mourner at the funeral, not anyone belonging to him. It was the agent and the lawyers that had managed it all.

Luckily the guard's spare time came to an end here, before Christabel's self-control completely failed her; but when she was alone again, the picture of the stately lonely funeral did for her what her own personal sorrow had failed to do; it touched the pathetic side of her

thoughts, and unsealed the fountain of tears, and she was able, for the first time since her trouble began, to weep freely. She felt weak as a child when the passion of tears had exhausted itself, but the excitement of brain was relieved, and she could think calmly.

The one place that had any attraction for her now was this little inn at Thorpe Leigh, that he had called home-like, in whose neighbourhood they had spent a long summer's day together, and where he had nearly disclosed his secret to her. There she might hear news of him ; if not of his last days, at least anecdotes of the times when he had not been all hers, which would give her a possession in them that she had often longed for. From thence she could at all events remedy the omission that had struck her just now as so pathetic ; she could stand, a real mourner, and weep at his grave. In taking her ticket from her purse, where she had placed it the evening before, she discovered a store of bank-notes, that must have been folded away by her husband in an inside pocket on the day of their parting, and which she now perceived, with some grieved surprise, had been designed to last her through a much longer separation than she had anticipated at the time. This discovery at all events made the gratification of her present wish easy,

and determined her to write and beg Katherine to join her at Thorpe Leigh for a few weeks.

Further than that, Christabel did not feel at all disposed to look just then. Indeed, when she left the train at the junction, and got into the omnibus that was to take her to the village, nothing but the interest of recognising the scene of her last walk with her husband could have kept her up, under the suffering that increased upon her as the hours passed. When she arrived at her destination, she was glad to use the plea of health-seeking, which the guard had suggested, to account for her visit to the place; for she felt so ill that her one object was to escape to her room unquestioned, and reserve the little strength that remained, to write a letter to summon Katherine to come to her.

CHAPTER IV.

UP THE MOUNTAIN.

Though winter be over in March by rights,
'Tis May perhaps ere the snow shall have withered well off the heights :
You've the brown ploughed land before, where the oxen steam and
 wheeze,
And the hills over-smoked behind by the faint grey olive trees.

MADAME DE FLORIMEL was not a person who could take her pleasure silently, even when it was the enjoyment of such scenery as two or three hours' steady ascent from La Roquette, brought her into. She had made the journey every summer, since her husband's death left her free to indulge herself in the English luxury of spending a few weeks of each year from home ; but none the less was she full of astonishment and exclamation, and eager for sympathy when a turn in the road brought a yet higher snow-capped peak in sight, or disclosed another aspect of the diminishing valleys and plains they were leaving behind them. The two preoccupied irresponsible faces on the opposite side of the carriage began, before very long, to act as a great hindrance to her satisfaction, and

when the last glimpse of La Roquette, lying like a sparkling emerald gem amid its dwarfed grey olive-clad hills (which Madame de Florimel never failed to greet with a shout of welcome), called out no more than a languid remark from Lady Rivers and Alma, she could bear the situation no longer. Her respect for Wynyard's supposed disappointment yielded to her own urgent need of companionship, and after their stoppage for the mid-day meal and rest, she contrived, through one pretext or another, to keep him and his horse constantly close to the carriage for the rest of the day. She was continually discovering some want or inventing some fear that he only was capable of dealing with. Wynyard was in a mood to welcome this early opportunity of testing his power of being thoroughly at ease and unconcerned in Alma's company. He had been a good deal disgusted with himself for feeling so much emotion as her sudden appearance at La Roquette—two afternoons ago—had called out. It vexed him to have to remember that the mere vision of her face had been enough, for a few hours at least, to overthrow the train of thought and feeling he had been so carefully building up during the last three months. Now that a day's and night's sober reflection had restored his equilibrium, he had a proud sense of self-conquest in being able to chat

quite easily with Madame de Florimel about La Roquette affairs, while Alma was listening, undisturbed, except by an occasional wonder as to what *she* thought of his coolness—or by a passing consciousness that the face opposite Madame de Florimel wore the softened dejected expression which, of all its other beautiful looks, had been the dearest to him in the old days. If Horace Kirkman's promised bride was in a sentimental mood, thinking perhaps of her delightful bridegroom, was there any need for him to concern himself about it; unless it were to be thankful for the complete restoration to sanity that made it a matter of so much indifference to him, that he did not glance at the bowed head and drooping lips a second time. To prevent the temptation to look again, from mere curiosity to ascertain if his first impression was correct, Wynyard spurred his horse up a steep cut of mountain path, that zigzagged above the carriage road, gathered a spray of wild quince-blossom and put it in his coat. When Madame de Florimel called him to her side, by-and-by, he made her admire its waxy pink-and-white blooms, and its fresh wild beauty. A flag of the spring he called it, strong, and fair, and choice—a spring face without a shade of guile in it—they were following the spring up the mountains, he said, and might for once in their lives, have a portion of the

season's lights, and scents, and sounds twice over, each day the facsimile of another day they had already enjoyed down below.

When they had arrived at their night quarters, a modest wayside village inn, Wynyard deserted the evening meal for a walk among the hills, which he prolonged till the last flush of the sunset had faded on the snow-peaks; and though he came back with his arms full of mountain plants for Madame de Florimel to botanise, he did not linger more than a minute or two in the tiny parlour where Alma was seated before a tinkling piano, singing old-fashioned English songs as Madame de Florimel called for them. He went off to smoke a pipe and talk politics with some peasants and poor travellers who had congregated round a woodfire, and were eating garlicky-soup, and drinking wine in the kitchen beyond. He grew really interested in their talk, and cross-questioned them eagerly, trying hard to make out something of a picture from their solitary lives in the mountains, and so get a coherent notion of their ways of thinking. Yet all the time, between the questions and answers, high notes of Alma's voice reached him across the dividing space bringing well-remembered tones and words to his ear. "Douglas, Douglas!"—Was it a new tone of pleading, a new tenderness in the

voice, or only the old powerful charm, a little more thrilling now, because unheard so long?

When his companions deserted him at last, and he had to take his candle and retire to a wide, draughty bedroom at the top of the house, he made up his mind that the peasant's talk had roused him a good deal more than might have been expected. He was so far from any inclination towards sleep, that he unpacked his writing-case and determined to utilise this unexpected activity of brain, by working up his evening's experiences into an article for the journal he was accustomed to write for. He fancied himself just now in the right frame of mind for the production of one of the semi-philosophical, semi-descriptive essays, that had made his name, as a writer, already fairly well known; but when he had taken his pen, and the surging thoughts began to arrange themselves a little, the words that rose first did not take the course he had intended. He wrote on and on, correcting, changing, pacing up and down in the excitement of composition, till the first streak of rose-light dawned on the mountain-peak opposite his window, and it was clearly no use to go to bed at all. But his night's work, when completed at last, was not by any means what he had intended it to be when he sat down—a dissertation on French peasant-life in the Basses Alpes, and French

peasant politics. It was a poem that had grown up under his pen, as little as possible related to anything that had happened, or that he had been thinking about during the day; except perhaps that its music had, to his ear as he read it over for the last time, a ring, here and there, of the sweet rising and falling notes he had caught through the discord of the kitchen noises. It was a sea-poem, and represented the conflict in the mind of a young sailor to whom the sirens are singing while his boat is nearing the sunny, white-sanded bay where his home lies, and his love is awaiting him. On one side of the boat stretches the many-coloured changeful sea, whose mystery entices and fascinates the sailor's eyes to look backwards, earnestly as he strives to fix them on the steady, reposeful prospect in front. Moment by moment the boat nears the shore with every stroke of his oar upon the water, while the voices behind him, singing in chorus, wax sadder and sweeter in their appealing cry. Will he plunge in, and resolve for ever the enigma that has tempted and haunted him from the first hour when he put to sea; or will he, with a last vigorous stroke, climb the one wave that holds him back from the cheerful daylight and the restful green land? The poem would not end with anything but the question; and, after a trial or two, Wynyard was content to leave

it there. It was the best thing, the nearest approach to what he could allow himself to call poetry, that he had ever written, he thought; and yet, when, just as he had critically come to this conclusion, a sunbeam darted through his uncurtained window, and lit up the disorder of the table at which he had been writing, a sudden disgust seized him, and he was glad to huddle all the papers out of sight into his writing-case, and turn to the prospect of emerging white mountain-tops, and rolling mist-wreaths that his casement disclosed. His night's work seemed feverish and unreal as he gazed on, and as the solemn, steadfast mountain shapes, one behind another, dawned on his sight in the advancing daylight. The inhabitants of the little farm-inn were astir as soon as the sun was fully risen, and from his post of observation, Wynyard recognised one after another of his last night's acquaintance setting forth to the work of the day; sensible people, who had slept well, and who were coming out now, with free healthy minds and bodies and single hearts, to earn another untroubled night's repose in the strong, cool, mountain air. He would have done better, he thought, to write prose about them, than verse about sirens, or perhaps it would have been better still not to have written at all; for who was he to set forth his hasty notions about these simple, inarticulate lives,

that were lived in the presence of such a nature as this, and whose patient round of toil and endurance possibly soared very far beyond his conception? It would be best, since the sensible night's rest was no longer attainable, to make as much of the sunrise for once as they did every day, and try if the keen morning breezes on those upland pastures would not help him to sensible, straightforward views of his own life. There it was, remote enough from sirens, if one could see it so very straitly mapped out by circumstances and character, his work, and the aims he had long ago set before himself—not unworthy ones, surely,—and, for nearer interests the Saville Street household; gentle little true-hearted Emmie West, whom he quite hated himself for not thinking about with more tenderness in her sorrow just now. He made a hasty morning toilette while he was battling with thoughts like these, and then left the house, following in the wake of the last set of workers he had watched from his window—a party of children leading a flock of goats by a steep rocky path to an upland pasture, in the hollow of the hill.

Some three hours later, Alma, from her window, which commanded the same prospect as his, saw him returning to the house, followed by two or three of the farmhouse children, and carrying their basket of mush-

rooms for them down the hill, and she augured badly for herself from the expression of his face. She had been used to read it like an open book, and she felt sure that he had been making some resolutions adverse to her aims, on that mountain walk from which he was returning so gaily. A moment's discouragement bowed her head, and then she raised it again, proud and joyful. Of course—of course—how could she even for a moment have so misread the signs? What need would there be to make resolutions, and why should he avoid her, if he did not care for her still? It would have been unlike him to show mere dislike or anger in that way. She could imagine the sort of contemptuous kindness he would have shown her, if he had arrived at despising her only, and anything short of such contempt, she told herself, she could and would bear and conquer. Once convinced, as she believed she now might be, that he loved her still, she would not be daunted by avoidance—she would have courage to read the signs rightly, and trust that occasion would favour her with some golden opportunity for explanation, which she promised herself not to lose.

How natural it seemed, to be watching him, and feeling him her own! How familiar all the characteristic gestures were, and how dear! How could she ever have

dreamed that anyone would rejoice in them but herself! It was not mere physical gifts, such as anyone might have, she was admiring, as she watched his quick, firm step on the mountain path. Horace Kirkman would have returned from a mountain climb as fresh and vigorous, but the peasant children would not have been clustering round him; he would not have stooped down just where the flinty watercourse intersected the path to hoist that little barefooted three-years-old urchin on his shoulder. It would not have been Horace Kirkman's instinct to turn back and hold the gate of the farm-yard open, for the white-capped old woman, bending under her load of firewood. Neither would he have found anything to say to the three Savoyards, grandfather, father, and son, who were lingering about the inn-door, for the chance of exchanging a morning greeting with the stranger who had talked with them so pleasantly last night. Alma half smiled to herself as she pictured the dumb, sulky dignity of demeanour that would have hedged in her late admirer from such advances, to say nothing of the sense of injury he would have felt, if anyone had supposed him capable of carrying on a conversation in two or three different *patois*. Yes, indeed, it required more than a surface polish, more than one or two generations of

good manners, to acquire the simple, gracious frankness that won its way with every grade and age alike, and opened all minds as with a golden key. A royal nature, formed to shine in high places and govern men, Alma called it now; not discerning, subtle-minded as she was in probing other people's doubtings, how much her point of view had changed with her secret knowledge; nor choosing to remember how jealous she had been of this very same facility when it had been Wynyard Anstice, the briefless barrister who outraged conventionalities royally, and chose his intimates irrespective of their value in society.

The start was later than Madame de Florimel would have liked if she had been alone, but Alma had won her heart last night by her singing, and she was disposed to be gracious towards her fellow-travellers. It was a morning of steady climbing, following the curves of the magnificent road that winds up the first range of the Maritime Alps, with rocky white cliffs, rent and torn into innumerable clefts, towering above, and sheer depths of precipice yawning beneath. There was little opportunity for the party to separate, and some real excuse for Madame de Florimel's nervousness, as the leading horse in their team was ill-broken. An hour or two after the start, this horse took fright at the sudden appearance,

round a sharp curve in the road, of a baggage-waggon, with an escort of blue-coated soldiers, and it could not be quieted or persuaded to pass the object of its terror, till Wynyard, who had got off his own horse, led it forward, coaxing it with hand and voice into good behaviour. There was a moment of very real danger when the terrified animals plunged and threw their freight almost over the edge of the precipice, so that the far depths below, where a river gleamed and tinkled, became visible to the occupants of the carriage in a flash of distinctness that was very trying to their nerves. Alma was the only one of the ladies who showed decent presence of mind on the occasion. As soon as she saw Wynyard preparing to dismount, she called to him to throw the reins to her, and, by-and-by, taking advantage of a minute's quiet, she sprang from the carriage and took charge of the saddle-horse, leading it under the cliff out of the way of the turmoil while the difficult passage with the refractory team was accomplished. This was an affair of some moments. The baggage-waggon jangled far down the road, was lost behind one curve, and emerged on another, and Alma had the scene to herself for long enough to be awed by the lonely grandeur of the heights above and depths below, before Wynyard returned to relieve her of the

charge of his horse, and thank her for her service, and praise her courage.

His first words, after such an escape and in such a scene, were naturally more friendly than any that had passed between them hitherto, but when they had turned to walk towards the carriage an embarrassed silence fell. It however rather gratified than disconcerted Alma to perceive that her moody companion studiously avoided looking at her, turning his head to stare at the black spot far down the white road, which was all that was now visible of the waggon, or following the flight of a bird along the side of the cliff with his eyes, rather than let them meet hers. He must no doubt be thinking, as she was, of former occasions when they had been alone on a hill-side together, in those happy Isle-of-Wight days, when Constance and young Lawrence were so apt to stroll out of sight, and a tendency to dissolve into pairs had marked all their walking parties. If she did speak, she felt it must be about an earlier, less self-conscious stage of their intimacy, and at last, just as they came in sight of the waiting carriage, she found her voice.

“It was well,” she said, as lightly and confidently as she could, “that you taught me how to speak to a horse long ago. Don’t you remember that I took my first riding lessons from you and Frank, the second

Christmas holidays you spent at South Lodge with us, when you and I broke quite out of bounds one day, and followed the hounds through a whole delightful morning, without anyone ever being the wiser?"

He did not look at her till she had finished speaking, but when their eyes met at last, she was startled by the anger in his. "How dare you put me in mind of those times, being what you are?" they seemed to ask. "How can you have the effrontery to court such recollections now?" She felt herself growing paler under the pain the steady look gave her, and then blushing violently, lest words she could never forget should actually be spoken. It was a relief to her when he turned away without speaking, and prepared to mount his horse.

"You had better hasten on to the carriage," he said coldly, when his foot was in the stirrup. "I must mount here. They are waiting for you, and we have lost a great deal of time already."

When they were again *en route*, and Madame de Florimel had leisure to notice how pale Alma was, and how her knees trembled long after she was seated in the carriage, she was much impressed with admiration for the self-control she had previously put upon herself, and did not know how to praise or pity her enough. "It

had, indeed, been a tremendous effort," she insisted, and Alma was a heroine who had shown the true English force of character in a moment of danger. "Where would you find a French girl who would have been worth anything when the management of a refractory horse was in question, or who would have volunteered to be left alone with a strange animal on a solitary road?" She had quite a fit of English enthusiasm on the subject of Alma's courage; and when Wynyard came alongside of the carriage, which was not for an hour or two, she could not refrain from magnifying it to him, by relating and dwelling upon the distressing after-effects which Alma's unheard-of exertions had brought upon her.

Wynyard, by that time, was equal to the task of expressing as much polite sympathy and anxiety for Miss Rivers's recovery as Madame de Florimel required of him; and Alma, through all the pain of hearing him speak of her and to her, as if she had been an ordinary travelling acquaintance about whom he was conventionally concerned, felt satisfied that a step in the direction of her own wishes had been taken, in what seemed at first sight so adverse to them. She need not fear another such rebuff; it was something that had to come, and was now over, a necessary step taken, preparing the way for the explanation that was to be given by-and-by. And now

the security he would feel in having so plainly put a stop to conversation on old times, and prescribed a footing of acquaintanceship instead of their former intimacy, would make it easier to slide into ordinary talk on topics of the present. How much she could make of that, Alma knew, even if she did not reckon, as she believed she might, knowing the pitiful heart she had to deal with, on a little compunction stealing in, now that he was made aware of the pain his anger had given her. Any way, she thought it was something got over, a step towards her end.

CHAPTER V.

ON REVIENT TOUJOURS.

Ah ! d'un ardeur sincère
Le temps ne peut distraire,
Et nos plus doux plaisirs
Sont dans nos souvenirs.
On pense, on pense encore
À celle qu'on adore,
Et l'on revient toujours
À ses premiers amours.

THE succeeding days verified Alma's hope of greater freedom of intercourse being established between the different members of the travelling party who had set out in so much constraint, and with so many painful feelings to hold them apart. References to old times were rigidly avoided, and old intimacy tacitly ignored; but daily and hourly intercourse soothed down restraint and cured painful consciousness, until a quiet friendly footing prevailed among them all, which Alma was very careful not to overstep. It served her even better than she had expected. Wynyard no longer avoided speaking to her or looking at her; and as he was a person whose small

coin in conversation soon came to an end, it was inevitable that in the course of hours spent in such solitudes as they were travelling through, topics should be touched upon, or allusions called forth which, in spite of the most carefully-preserved appearance of recent acquaintanceship, revealed sympathies in thought or recollection such as strangers could not possibly have had. Wynyard might keep studiously the slightest reference to former times out of his talk, but he could not hinder Alma from understanding a half-expressed thought of his, more quickly than any one who did not know his mind through and through, would have understood it; or prevent her being able to supply a forgotten name in a Provençal legend which they had once read out of the same book. It was hardly surprising, as the days passed on, that the conversations, as they arose between those two, grew more and more engrossing, for they had the unusual charm of a mutually-felt, carefully-avoided memory,—a pearl of secret knowledge and intimate understanding gleaming up through the waters of ordinary talk, alluring the speakers moment by moment to dive down and bring it to the surface. No wonder that lines from Wynyard's siren song kept recurring to his mind, or that a vague discontent with himself mingled with a growing reluctance to anticipate the end of the

journey. He would once or twice have broken away from the party if he could have done so without assigning any reason; but they had got into a district remote from railways, with few and recognised resting-places, and it was difficult to separate without an appearance of quarrel which he was anxious to avoid.

The middle of the fourth day's journey was to bring the party to St. Julien, the first place where they expected to find letters awaiting them, and their final stage before they reached Madame de Florimel's destination. This last was Château Arnaud, an old residence belonging to the De Florimel family, part of which had long since been degraded into a farmhouse and inn, while a few rooms were still preserved with the old furniture, in readiness for occasional visits from its owners. In Count de Florimel's lifetime such visits had been very rare, and seldom extended beyond a day or two. But madame had conceived a liking for the place, and was not without ambition of introducing into the management of the property, something of the English vigour that was bearing such good fruits at La Roquette. If only another Joseph Marie might be found to carry out her views at Château Arnaud with the same zeal and discretion that was shown at La Roquette, madame felt sure there would be everything to hope for the place.

“And precisely the newly-married pair.” Madame wondered she had not thought of this before—that she had ever dreamed of another lot for Madelon. How had it not occurred to her from the first! The marriage of last week had evidently been made for no other purpose than to provide two managers precisely after her own mind, for her property at Château Arnaud—Antoine and Madelon! Here was the place made; and next year she might have English strawberries growing on the slopes above the château, and Alderney cows in the farmyard.

All through the morning hours of their last day’s journey, Madame de Florimel kept Wynyard engaged in a brisk argument as to whether or not this brilliant idea should be carried out. Whether Antoine and Madelon should not be transported from their native place to reign as intendant and his wife over madame’s property in the mountains. Wynyard really did not know why he objected, or why he should grow absolutely cross when madame put aside all the objections he raised against her scheme. It was nothing to him, and there was no excuse for his growing eloquent against the iniquity of anyone’s being bribed to leave La Roquette who could live there in peace and tranquillity; he only understood that there was an actual pain in his mind which coloured his words, and gave them another meaning besides that which

referred to Antoine and Madelon's affairs. Was it for himself that he was regretting the peaceful atmosphere of the place, and some pure influence he had felt there, which was slipping away ?

It was the last morning, and Alma kept herself quite out of the conversation, sitting back, her eyes fixed on the receding snowy heights, and with an unwonted expression of uneasiness and dejection in her attitude and countenance. Her clasped hands lay uselessly in her lap ; her eyes, though they turned always to the receding prospects, seemed to see nothing ; her lips trembled every now and then as if she were struggling to keep back tears. Why should Wynyard's exaggerated praise of La Roquette vex her, or was it that at all, or something else, that troubled her and kept her silent ? What did it matter to him ? Wynyard asked himself. This was the last morning. That beloved, hated, bewitching, repelling face, with its haunting sadnesses and inscrutable lights and shadows, would never be so before him again, that he should be compelled to study it and wonder over its changes. It was the last of that sort of pain he need ever have, for he was quite determined to stay only one night at Château Arnaud, where the Riverses were to remain a fortnight. He might reasonably plead long-neglected business as an excuse for hurry-

ing away as soon as opportunity offered, and the next news that would reach him of Alma Rivers would be the announcement of her marriage in *The Times* newspaper some late summer morning towards the close of the season, when everybody was getting married. Kirkman—Rivers; the lines of small print seemed to float between him and her beautiful sorrowful face, and were reason enough for his thinking he ought not to look so much at it; though they afforded no apparent excuse for his throwing so much animosity into his arguments against Antoine's and Madelon's promotion. Alma heard the excited talk about a matter incomprehensible to her, and it helped to depress her; but it was not the cause of her sadness. It came to her muffled, through a crowd of anxious and regretful thoughts which made that last morning, to her also, full of bitterness. At Dimes they were to call at the post-office for letters. Madame de Florimel had ordered hers to be sent there from La Roquette, and Wynyard had mentioned incidentally last night that he had given that address to his London correspondent, and expected a budget of letters and papers.

The forenoon was stealing away, and they were going downhill rapidly. None of those excuses for getting out to walk or sketch that had occurred while they were ascending, could be found now, and no one

this morning seemed to be paying any attention to the scenery, magnificent as it was. Lady Rivers on her side of the carriage, and Ward on the box were nodding comfortably through a great part of the morning, and Wynyard and Madame de Florimel were quarrelling. Alma, if she observed anything, saw only in the changing scene around, some other existence into which she longed to escape. The eagle that rose from crag to crag, and mounted in ever-ascending spirals into the wide blue—the rough-haired little shepherdess who paused half way up a green slope to look down into the carriage—yes, and even that bent figure of a poor Cagot-woman who, harnessed like a horse to a rude covered cart, dragged her children and her belongings with horrible toil up the steep—awoke in her equally a vague longing to escape, to lose herself in any one of those lives, anywhere, so that she might avoid the defeat and shame she saw before her, the regrets whose bitterness she believed, in another hour or two, she should taste in full measure.

At the foot of the long descent the road wound through a ravine with a sheer cliff on one side, and on the other a river opaline with melting ice from the mountain-streams that fed it, and reflecting gems of colour from the flowery borders. Here there was hardly

room for a horse to ride abreast with the carriage, and Madame de Florimel consented to a plan of Wynyard's that he should ride quickly forward to Dimes, which was a few miles out of the direct road to Château Arnaud, get any letters that might be awaiting them at the post-office, and meet them at a wayside resting-place where they could take their noon-day meal, and start for Château Arnaud with a shorter journey before them.

What a hurry he was in to get his letters Alma thought, as she watched him urge his horse to a gallop, as soon as he had gained a little distance from the carriage. He would have time enough to read them before she saw him again, and to open any newspapers that might be awaiting him, and take in all the immense change in his prospects that could not fail to be made known to him now, through one source or another. Crises of that kind act suddenly, and news of social elevation is apt to look familiar when it is an hour old. It would be Earl Anstice who met her, when next her eyes fell on that receding figure, and she should know in an instant that she had lost her aim, been defeated in the game for which she had played with a false die, the thought of which would shame her uselessly all the rest of her life.

Ah! fate had been hard upon her, very hard. She had only asked for one little half-hour alone with her

lover, for he was her lover still, she was sure of that; only demanded one little rift to be made for her in the thin wall of ceremony that divided them, and she could have done all the rest herself. She could have said words that could now never be said, but which, spoken half an hour ago, would have secured the happiness of two lives.

Oh the little more, and how much it is !
And the little less, and what worlds away !

Ah ! how bitter it was—how bitter it was to be baffled, for want of the opportunity to whisper one word !

Alma had time to indulge in these regrets without interruption when the party left the carriage; for the farmhouse at which they baited the horses proved too uninviting to tempt the ladies to enter, and Madame de Florimel organised a little encampment in a meadow by the river. Alma withdrew herself a few paces from the others, on pretext of getting a better view of the head of the ravine for a sketch, and was virtually alone for an hour or so, when the meal was over. A person disciplined by much experience of sorrow would hardly have kept such bitter, self-regarding thoughts in the presence of the scene Alma was sketching. The

grandeur and the calm would have rebuked the self-pity into peace. But Alma was not a disciplined character in any sense. She had never yet faced even as a possibility the thought of not getting what she really desired, in the end: she had hesitated between ambitions and likings, but she had never hitherto believed in disappointment as a possible condition for herself, and now that its shadow was falling on her, she rebelled fiercely against submission. There was no side of her mind that would admit the thought of denial. The lofty mountain peaks before her eyes, snow-capped, or bare and rugged, that meekly bore the brunt of the storms, and sent the fruitful rain down their barren sides, to enrich the valleys at their feet; the river rippling past, from which the flowers and reeds on its banks were stealing their life every minute; the glad mild air; the wealth of rich colour, had no parable of self-renunciation to unfold to her, for she could not read their language. Their gladness and calm only struck her as a bitter contrast to the unrest and discontent of which her soul was full. Why should nature be glad and she sorrowful? Why should the earth have its spring, flowers bloom, and birds sing, if youthful hearts were to go unsatisfied, and the spring-time of a life be darkened with disappointment? As the outline of her drawing

grew and she began to wash in the delicate first colour, Alma had by force of self-pity cleared herself of any sense of blame. She managed to forget her own half-heartedness in the first days of Wynyard's poverty, and even arrived at almost persuading herself that she had never seriously thought of becoming Horace Kirkman's wife. The tragedy of so true a love as hers being crossed, such a perfect happiness as she might have had being lost through a train of trivial mischances, was the only side of the question she would allow herself to look at. Wynyard's return took her by surprise at last. She had been listening for horse hoofs along the road, but he had alighted at a further gate of the farmyard, and hearing of their whereabouts came to the riverside on foot. He approached her first from behind, and held down a letter which she took without looking up. Yet something in his voice reassured her; there was no change in that, at all events.

"Your father's handwriting, I think," he said. "You will be glad of news."

Alma put the letter down on her knee, and went on with her drawing.

"Will you not open it?" he said after a while, still keeping his place behind her chair. "Are you not going to tell Madame de Florimel and me how Miss

West bore her journey, and how she found her friends in Saville Street ? ”

“Not now,” said Alma; “mamma is sleeping after her coffee, and I cannot rouse her to hear a letter read aloud. It will be all about poor Uncle West’s funeral, and had better be kept till to-night, when the journey will be over, and she has a prospect of rest before her.”

Alma fancied she heard an impatient sigh as Wynyard turned away from her to Madame de Florimel. Had he really expected her to give him news of Emmie West, she wondered, with the first pang of jealousy that had ever troubled her? Could he have heard that news and be thinking of Emmie West? In a few minutes she raised her head from her drawing, and ventured on a scrutinising look at his face to see if she could detect traces of unusual emotion on it. He had thrown himself on the grass by Madame de Florimel’s side, and was emptying his pockets of letters for her, and in another moment or two they were deep in *La Roquette* news; Wynyard evidently bent on making his peace with her, after his fit of contradiction by attention to the details she imparted. Everything that had happened in *La Roquette* from the moment of madame’s departure to the hour in which Joseph Marie finished his despatch

appeared to be retailed and commented upon. Alma convinced herself, as she listened, that Wynyard's interest in all this gossip was not altogether feigned, yet could he have endured the enumeration of the guests at somebody's wedding, and found an observation to make about everyone, if such news as Alma knew of, was really in his possession ?

"Ah, here is a letter for you, Wynyard, from Paris, enclosed with mine. It must have arrived the very day after we started, and it seems to have something hard inside," and Madame de Florimel held a thin letter up to the light, showing a round dark circle through the paper, and looked at it rather inquisitively. Wynyard changed countenance as he stretched out his hand to take it.

"It will keep, like all the others," he said, thrusting it into the depths of his pocket with hardly a glance at the writing outside.

"Then you have had others."

"Oh yes," wearily. "A big budget sent on from my chambers, but it looks like business, and I have been such a sinner lately, and am in such deep disgrace with my chiefs, that I will not irritate it just now. Let us keep clear of proof and printer's ink, as long as we have those snow-peaks in sight at all events. When we arrive to-night in the region of prose, and prospective Alderney

cows—‘ Butter and eggs and a pound of cheese,’ it will be time enough to begin.”

“ But you have nothing else to do now,” urged Madame de Florimel, who was bent on knowing what the hard circle she had felt within the Paris letter signified. “ You will be tired of doing nothing for an hour, and we shall have to wait quite as long as that still, for the *cocher* declares the horses are tired, and will not start before three o’clock. What will you do meanwhile ? ”

“ I won’t read my letters,” said Wynyard laughing. “ Give it up, dear madame, for I am not to be badgered into making any such sensible use of my time here. Come now, we have been quarrelling all the morning, think of something pleasanter to order me to do in nearly the last leisure hour we shall spend together, for how many years I wonder ? ”

“ Make a sketch like Miss Rivers. I should be glad to have a drawing of yours to put between those two of your mother’s that hang over my boudoir chimney-piece now,—you used to draw a little when you were last with me.”

“ A little, truly ! For which performances I have just knowledge enough to blush now.”

“ But you ought to draw—being your mother’s son.”

“ Ah, there has been a mistake about that, the talent

I should by rights have inherited, has somehow passed on to my cousin Raphael, with the artistic name my mother chose for her godson instead of her son. We used to quarrel desperately about it when we were boys, for I had always been told I was to be the artist, and I could never bring myself to allow, even in the face of the clearest evidence, that he could do anything that I could not. I have had to cave in since, and confess that whereas I can only criticise, he might have been an artist if he had not been an earl."

"Ah, that is the pity! If you and he could but have changed places. He is terribly out of place where he is now, and as you say an artist lost."

"You might take a more cheerful and complimentary view of things, and look upon me as an able lawyer, or if that is too great a stretch of imagination for a hot noon-day, at least a penny-a-liner gained; or you might congratulate me on being provided with an infallible test of friendship, by my reverse of fortune. Poor Ralph has been driven into solitude, from the dread that seized him as soon as he realised his consequence, of being absolutely hunted to death, and losing his senses among the fascinations offered for his choice. He will inevitably end by marrying a kitchen-maid to secure himself from an angel, whereas I can pick my society with perfect

safety, having the rough side always presented to me, and being allowed to see the most bewitching of mortals in their true colours. As Wyatt says in his Address to Fortune :

In hindering me, me didst thou further.

Poverty is an immense safeguard—and enlightener, I can assure you—an absolute Ithuriel's spear. By-the-way, I vote we all cap verses, and take for our subject the advantage of poverty as a test of worth—I will begin with Wyatt :

Though thou hast set me for a wonder,
And seekest by change to do me pain,
Men's minds yet may'st thou not so order ;
For honesty if it remain
Shall shine for all thy cloudy rain.

“There! I am sure, Miss Rivers will have no difficulty in capping me with something still more to the purpose.”

Alma kept her face bent over her drawing, not daring to seem to hear. Surely she did not deserve this. His heart must indeed be bitter against her, if he could thus speak on the last morning they were ever likely to spend together. If this was his way of looking at the past, she had rightly concluded that all hope of reconciliation would be over for ever when once he had heard the news

that must already be in his possession, that he might now make his own at any moment.

The little less, and what worlds away.

Her drawing was all a pretence by this time, for she dared not lift up her eyes to the landscape for fear that the tears gathering in them should overflow, and she washed in colours at random while she debated with herself whether she had courage to brave out this last hour, or whether she should resign the faint possibility of a kinder word, and betake herself to her mother's side under a distant tree, where Lady Rivers was taking her noon-day sleep. There Wynyard would certainly not seek her, and when once her obnoxious presence was removed, he would perhaps take out his letters—and then—her suspense would be over at all events.

“So you will neither of you cap my verse?” Wynyard said, still in the same tone. “That's odd, I must say, when I have given you such a subject.”

“Miss Rivers is busy with her drawing, don't you see?” said Madame de Florimel blandly; “and for me—you know my love for English poetry, I understood your Ithuriel's spear, and think I could even repeat the passage. From Milton, is it not? But I have not the poets quite so readily as you have. It is not a fair

challenge. You had better refresh my memory by reading something."

How well Alma knew the worn copy of selections from Browning he drew from his pocket. It had stood on the schoolroom shelf for a year and a half, between one of his visits to South Lodge and another, and as he turned it over in his hands, the very rain-stains on the purple cover, and the worn edges, found voices to call to her, and put her in mind of words and thoughts, and looks of long ago, that made the contrast between then and now more bitter. How reluctantly he had taken the book back that morning when she had brought it downstairs, to give it to him, in a fit of girlish disgust at a complacent remark on their intimacy her mother had made in her hearing. And now—did he remember all that, or was it just a common book to him to be read indifferently with anybody? How much of it had Emmie West heard?—"Love's so different with us men." He dipped into the book here and there before making up his mind where to read, and Alma, knowing its pages almost by heart, could guess pretty accurately which were the poems he glanced at and rejected impatiently, "In a year," "Two in the Campagna." He was half-tempted to one of these she saw, and then he fluttered the leaf back almost

to the beginning of the volume and began to read abruptly :

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat—
Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
Lost all the others she lets us devote.

The scorn in his voice, while he was reading the first verse, and a yearning pathos that crept into the words of the second :

Blot out his name, then—record one lost soul more !
One more task declined, one more pathway untrod,
One more triumph for devils, and sorrow for angels,
One wrong more to man, one more insult to God !

were very audible to Alma, though blinding tears had come to her eyes and a rush of blood to her ears ; and all the self-control of which she was capable only sufficed to keep her intensely still, with her face as well concealed as possible by her drawing-board, while the drops that would not be kept back any longer fell slowly and washed out her colours. She would not own herself convicted, by getting up till the reader's voice ceased, but then she would escape and at least secure herself from such torture as that again.

Life's night begins ; let him never come back to us.
There would be no doubt, hesitation, and pain.

Would it never be over? How could a poem which treated of a wholly different matter say so much between them two? Had he intended it when he began to read? Had he divined her intention, and was he taking this way to warn her "not to come back to him?" The suspicion was so intolerable that Alma felt she could not endure the rest of her life under it, and from the very excess of pain, drew courage to fight against it.

The reader's voice ceased, having softened into a deeper pathos at the last line, and Alma did not move, not so much as to wipe the tears from her wet face. The sun would soon dry them, and when they were dried she thought she would speak. Some word to save her pride would surely come, before this last opportunity of justifying herself had slipped from her for ever. Madame de Florimel was the first of the three to break the silence. The passive character of listener to poetry she only partially understood, did not please her for long together, and as her companions were silent, she grew restless.

"The sun is growing hot here, and I thought I heard Lady Rivers stirring," she said. "I will go and see how she feels disposed for an immediate start, and perhaps you will look up the driver, Wynyard, and try to persuade him to let us get away soon. I will send Ward meanwhile to

help Miss Rivers to collect her drawing materials that there may be no delay when the horses are ready."

Alma relinquished all pretence at drawing when her companions' backs were turned, and covered her face from the hot sun, and the sight of her tear-stained paper, with both hands. She must compose herself in a few minutes, before she was called to take her place in the carriage, and sit opposite her mother and Madame de Florimel through the long afternoon. Perhaps Wynyard would come back to carry her sketching-board to the carriage. It would be only common courtesy, and let him be as angry as he might, he would never neglect that; if so, should she find the word she wanted? The sound of returning footsteps came much sooner than she expected, so long before she was ready to speak, that she kept her face hidden for quite a minute after she knew that Wynyard was standing in front of her, looking at her, and, for all she knew, at her tear-blistered drawing.

"Miss Rivers," a grave voice said, "Alma," and then she took down her hands and two pale agitated faces confronted each other. His was full of grave wonder, almost rebuke, and hers—she only guessed how piteous it was, by the compunction and pain that grew into the eyes that looked at her. "Madame de Florimel sent me to help you with your easel," Wynyard began

after a minute's silence that seemed full of speech. "But there is no hurry, let us leave it for a moment and walk along by the river. The cooler air will do you good."

Alma obeyed, but she was weak with the pent-up emotion of so many hours, and as they walked slowly by the river-path, short quivering sobs kept rising, and prevented her answering when he tried to begin a commonplace conversation to set her at ease.

"I am afraid I have hurt you," he said at last, gently, "and I ought to beg your pardon; I came back for that."

"You meant it for me—oh Wynyard," she broke out. "You think I have done that, sold myself for a handful of silver!"

"I am sorry you so read the half-thought that was running in my mind. I ought not to have given you occasion. It was a shabby thing to do, to express, through another man's words, what I should not have dared to say to you in my own; I beg your pardon for it. Perhaps I hardly knew what I was doing; the words got into my head as I read, I think."

"But you think it?"

"I shall not think it after this; I shall go away a repentant man, ashamed of having judged you. I *had* no right to conclude that you did not love where you

had chosen, and I beg Mr. Horace Kirkman's pardon as well as yours. He is a happier man than I took him for."

"Oh no, no."

"Well, I must always think him so, and, by-and-by, perhaps, I shall manage to do so without much grudging. —There!" holding out his hand—"let us shake hands over your engagement at last, and agree to-day that we will keep only the best recollections out of the past, and meet when we do meet, which won't be often, like old friends. I promise never to judge you again, or annoy you with my peevish mortification, at any rate."

She did not like the words, but she clasped the offered hand and held it, as a drowning man clasps a spar thrown to him amid the waves he is battling with.

"Wynyard, I must speak. I have tried to tell you before, and you would not let me; but this is perhaps the last time we shall ever talk freely together, and I cannot have you misunderstanding me all your life."

"Tell me anything you like."

"You misunderstood me just now. I do not love Horace Kirkman. I have never loved him; there is not a man in England that has less interest for me than he."

"And yet you are going to marry him."

“Oh, no, no. Wynyard, such a thing would never have been thought of by anyone, if you had not deserted me when I wanted you to go with me to Golden Mount last Christmas. The intimacy that has given rise to false hopes, and has lowered me in my own eyes, would never have been entered upon, if you had helped me.”

“Alma!” going closer to her and taking her other hand. “But how can we so have misunderstood each other? Why did you not answer my letter?”

“I have not answered it yet. You told me to question my heart, and try myself; you said you would wait an indefinite time.”

“Yes, indeed; waiting would have been nothing if you had only let me know it was waiting. And now, my darling, was it really so? Has your four months’ hesitation brought you really to think you can take me and the life I offered you then? May I hope for an answer—the answer I hoped for—to-day—after all?”

“After all! Wynyard!” (reproachfully) “you must not say ‘after all’ so often. You must not reproach me ever, with those four months. I cannot bear it, for I have been loving you all the time.”

They had turned a corner in the winding-path, and were now quite out of sight of the field, sheltered by overhanging wild briars and hazel boughs, and his answer was

to draw her closer to him, and kiss the trembling lips that whispered the words.

“Alma, my darling, my long-sought love—my queen! Is it possible that you love me?” he repeated.

For a moment or two, they stood together in a bewildering rush of joy, with the glad sunshine round them, and the river rippling an accompaniment to whispered words of love, and only the solemn white mountain peaks for mute witnesses to their reunion. One moment of untroubled content. Alma counted that one moment, before the worm in her conscience began to make itself felt, and eat into the heart of her joy.

“And you remember my letter?” Wynyard said at last, putting her a little further away that he might get a good look into her face. “You know what you are doing, and what sort of an impracticable *tête montée* you will have to put up with, for a husband? You will not be regretting the Gog and Magog palace all the time, or the applause of the worthy Philistines who would have honoured you, for doing well to yourself? My comfort is that you have had four long months to consider of it. And at the end you really say, do you, my darling, that ‘Love is enough?’”

“And you?” said Alma. “I have told you about myself—but you? What were you doing and feeling all

those four months you talk so much about? Tell me."

"Trying with all my heart and strength to forget and despise you; how successfully we won't say."

The words were spoken with a smile, and he drew her close to him again, begging her pardon in half-a-dozen different forms of self-accusation for having dared to doubt her, promising to credit her with every sort of disinterestedness and nobleness for the future. But even with his arm round her, and his loving thanks and praises in her ears, Alma felt that the moment's perfect content was over for her. The momentary tone of contempt had recalled her to a consciousness of facts she had been trying to forget, and she felt how different this taking of him was from what he believed it to be. "Some day he will find it out, and then what will he think of you? All this praise and gratitude is not given to you, for he does not know you. It is not yours." So the irrepressible small voice began already to whisper, poisoning all the sweets of love.

Madame de Florimel's shrill voice calling for them, reached their ears before Alma had brought herself to look up and speak frankly again, and she hastily drew her hands away.

"Remember," she said, "not a word, not a look to

startle my mother, or awaken Madame de Florimel's curiosity, till I give you leave. My mother must be prepared."

"Surely," Wynyard said, "after waiting four months in utter darkness I can bear a few hours' more silence, but don't let it go on. I know, dear, that there is a great deal for you to do and bear yet, that we are still very far from the goal; but let me have my fair share of any fighting there may yet be to win through, before we reach it. Don't put me aside again, and take all the brick-bats that may be flying about in the shape of remonstrances, on your own dear head. I think I should count for something in it, even with Lady Rivers, so don't let me be kept out of all knowledge of what is befalling you again."

"Only for to-night," said Alma hastily. "I must talk to mamma alone to-night. There is Madame de Florimel coming to look for us. Let us go to meet her."

CHAPTER VI.

FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

Similamente agli spendor mondani
Ordinò general ministra, e duce
Che permutasse a tempo li ben vani
Di gente in gente, e d' uno in altro sangue
Oltra la defension de' senni umani
Per ch' una gente mipera, e l' altra langue
Seguendo lo guidicio di costei
Ched è occulto com' in erba l' angue.

MADAME was not very much disturbed by the long *tête-à-tête*, nor even scandalised by the signs of recent agitation on the two faces that confronted her when she turned the corner. It was all very English; she did not quite like Alma's independence of her mother, but she excused Wynyard. For a young Englishman, there was, perhaps, no great indiscretion in seeking a private interview with the cousin of his lady-love when he wanted to hear news of her. In England at the present time such confidences appeared to be admissible between young people, even of a certain rank, judging

from the evidence of recent novels she had read. Madame, therefore, felt herself at liberty to mark her disapprobation no further than by a slight coldness in her manner of meeting the wanderers.

During the afternoon's drive, while Wynyard kept out of the way, she glided easily into talk with Alma about Château Arnaud affairs, and being used to one-sided conversation, she was scarcely at all disconcerted by the scanty, unmeaning responses she got to her remarks. One could not expect every English girl to be as intelligent about foreign farming matters, as that sensible, pretty little Emmie West had invariably shown herself.

Alma, on her side, found the effort of bringing out her "Yeses" and "Noes" in tolerably right order, a sufficiently hard task, and yet she was not sorry to be obliged to make it. It had a steadying effect on the tumult of thoughts and feelings that were struggling for the upper hand in her soul. Wonder, joy, love, and threatening remorse and self-disgust. It helped her to keep herself afloat in an unreal dream of present circumstances; the only way in which she could look at them, and preserve her calmness. She determined to let herself imagine, just for that one afternoon, that things really were with her as Wynyard was believing them to be, as he rode on and on through the dreamy, sunny

May afternoon. That it was just Wynyard Anstice she had accepted for her husband; that she was going to share a modest life with him, and that the letters he was carrying on to read leisurely at Château Arnaud, contained only ordinary news about his literary work, as he thought.

At sunset the travellers passed through a little town, built on the river whose borders they had skirted nearly all day, and as they entered the roughly-paved street, they met a procession of robed priests, singing hymns, and carrying wreaths of flowers to a chapel on the other side of the river, whose tinkling bell they heard summoning worshippers to some special service in honour of Mary's Month. The coachman drew up just before reaching the bridge, to avoid interfering with the *cortége*, and Wynyard rode to the side of the carriage and pointed out the chapel, half-hidden among plane trees, to which it was bound. While he spoke and looked at her, Alma realised her fancy for a moment or two as she wished. It was all so dreamlike. The chanting voices, and the faint scent of the flowers borne past them, the sweet, cool rush of water among the reeds at the bank's edge, and the long, level rays of golden light on the tree tops, and on the still spaces of the fields, and on the broad reaches of the hazy river. For a moment her thoughts met his without the dividing barrier of unshared know-

ledge, and she forgot everything but the love and trust in his eyes, and was able to think herself his, in the fashion he believed her to be, as she had been striving to do all the afternoon. Then the carriage began to move on again, and Wynyard, left behind, got off his horse to pick up a flower that had fallen from one of the wreaths, intending to ride after the carriage and give it to Alma; but it was a May rose, and after one glance at it, he threw it back into the dust again, remounted, and rode on slowly: he had received his first pull down to earth from the height to which Alma's confession had lifted him a few hours before. It was nearly dark when they reached Château Arnaud, and Lady Rivers, worn out with the long day's travelling, retired to her room at once, and did not reappear at the late meal. The rest of the party reassembled in one of the damp-smelling upper rooms of the house, left untouched from year to year between the brief visits of their owners. Such signs of recent preparation as were visible, the wood fire blazing on the handsome, rusty, brass andirons, the nosegays in the great vases in the window recesses, the well-spread centre table, only seemed to bring out more prominently the stately unhomeliness of the place, and draw protests from the faded tapestry, and the old-world allegorical figures painted on the ceiling, against the impertinence

of a modern generation in bringing its obtrusive interests and commonplace loves, to disturb the atmosphere left by long-dead actors of statelier times.

Alma kept out of the way till she was summoned to the table, and Wynyard, who was waiting at the door of the salon to take her in, was surprised at the shy gravity of her face, and her avoidance of his glance through all the first part of the meal. He thought she had been talking to her mother, and that the confidence had been ill received, and he longed for the moment when he might comfort her. Apropos of a love-story, provoked by one of the portraits on the walls, into which Madame de Florimel launched during supper, he threw in a remark or two, playful or serious as the case allowed, which Alma might apply to themselves, as well as to the old hero and heroine, if she pleased. But not even by that device could he win an upward look or a smile.

When supper was over they went into a balcony at the back of the house, to get a distant moonlight view of the mountain range they had that day descended, and when Madame de Florimel was leaning over the balustrade, wrestling with a refractory vine-branch that had lost its hold on the woodwork, Wynyard found an opportunity for a whispered word.

"Yes," he said, "I see how it is. Your mother is

unhappy, and you will not look at me. Never mind, dear. We will make her a great deal happier between us, by-and-by, than she could have been any other way. But I wish I could bear the present pain for you both. I wish just now, as I never thought to wish, that I still had that to offer you which would satisfy her ambition for you, and spare you the pain of disappointing her."

"Do you—do you, indeed?" Alma cried, startled out of her caution for a moment, and looking up at him with eager glad eyes. "Should you really be glad to know that we were not going to be poor?"

"I do not know that we shall be what I call poor," he answered, a little mortified at her eagerness. "Have a little faith in me, Alma, and persuade your mother to believe me worth something. It is not such a very hard lot I am asking you to share, dear, that you need look so fearful over it, and refuse me a smile on our betrothal night. I promise not to turn my back on any good fortune that comes, provided it is not through Mr. Kirkman's conjuring. Will that satisfy you?"

She would not see the hand stretched out to take hers, but slipped to Madame de Florimel's side, and busied herself with the vine-shoots till it was time to go in.

Bitter thoughts against herself swelled up in her

heart. It was always the same, she told herself; unfit for either course—too half-hearted to carry out any line of action thoroughly, good or bad; a waif buffeted about by caprice and conscience, and getting the evil of both courses by half-doing. If she could have responded cordially, and assured him that she did not fear poverty with him, all might have been well, and the good news might even yet have come sweetly; but conscience had made a coward of her, and planted a thorn already in their intercourse. Would that little wrong-doing in the beginning always crop up in her thoughts like this, or would she have strength—the evil strength or the good strength, she did not know which—to crush down the remembrance effectually at last, and walk into the perfect happiness that seemed so very close to her, and yet, in spite of what had been said to-day, not hers yet—not in her heart this moment?

Wynyard remained out in the balcony long after the ladies had left him. It had been an exciting day, a wonderful day, and it was not surprising that he could not all at once turn to his letters, especially as that thin letter with the Paris post-mark and the little hard circlet inside, was the one in all the budget that recurred to his thoughts first. The shrinking he felt to open it was a greater pain and remorse to him than it would have been

to a man who had less high views of what the relationship between men and women should be, than he had long entertained. It was in vain that he told himself, he might well be thankful there was so little to look back upon with regret, on his betrothal night. He had once thought to give a thoroughly loyal heart, that had never swerved, to the woman who loved him, and to have the assurance within himself that no other woman's life had been troubled or made the worse by him. And now there was the recollection of the shy happiness in Emmie's eyes when they stood upon the hill together at La Roquette, and whatever there might be in that letter to stand between him and the thorough satisfaction in Alma's surrender he had once thought to have. He did not believe that there would be anything for Emmie but a moment's pain and surprise when she heard; and yet to have disturbed that trustful, childlike heart with a moment's pain, seemed a cursed thing to have done, and he would have given a great deal that it all had not happened. The more he tried to think only of Alma, and to recall her looks and her words, and dwell on the wonder of her surrender, the triumph of being loved by her after all—the more vividly did this little sting of regret trouble and pain him. It ought all to have been such perfect joy, and he was angry with

himself for the want of loyalty that admitted a drawback in it. At last, when everything was still outside, and all the little lights had disappeared from the scattered houses on the hill-sides, he turned back into the room where the firelight had sunk down to glowing red embers, and a solitary candle was burning on the centre table, and took out his letters. There was a large packet forwarded from his chambers in London, and Emmie's letter; this he opened first and read through, then slowly tore it into small pieces, throwing them one by one on the fire. Yes, it had been worse even than he had anticipated; the hopeless tone, decipherable enough through the simple words, the sad little postscript, and, worst of all, the tear-blister just at the corner of the paper where there was no writing, and which must have fallen as she folded it. He sat looking at the fire, seeing, not that, but the May rosebud on the dusty road from which he had ridden away, till he grew out of patience with himself, and turned sharply back to the lamplight and the budget of letters on the table, determined to give a new direction to his thoughts.

Several letters fell out when he opened the packet, and he took them up at random without looking at their dates. The first he read puzzled him a good deal. It was in an unknown hand, and referred to some com-

munication sent on a previous day, an answer to which was anxiously expected. It ended with a postscript still more incomprehensible than the rest of the letter. "The body has not yet been found, but the coasts are being watched day and night, and two bodies of the shipwrecked crew came ashore this morning."

The next letter he tore open was from one of his literary colleagues, and was filled with congratulations on a sudden change of fortune. Throwing that aside, he came on a few lines from young Lawrence, written just before he started for Scotland, in which the whole story was plainly told: "Anstice is dead—drowned in Scotland—close to his place on the coast of Skye, where his mother was staying. She is in a dreadful state, and I am setting out to go to her to-day. You should come at once, for I shan't like to take more responsibility than I can help, and everything now devolves on you. You will have heard all particulars of the accident before my letter reaches you, for of course you were written to first. Getting no answer from you, Mrs. Anstice's companion sent to me, the only one of poor Ralph's friends at all come-at-able, or likely to have seen anything of him of late, and be able to comfort his mother with news of him. Poor fellow! it is altogether a miserable business. It seems he had had a quarrel

with his mother, and had been keeping out of everyone's way according to his wont. This is what I gather from his personal servant, just come to me from Leigh, who had heard nothing of his master for a month or more, before this terrible event. I don't congratulate you on the splendid fortune that must all come to you now. You will feel too much cut up about poor old Ralph to care to be congratulated yet; but, all the same, there can be no doubt about it—you're the right man in the right place at last, and have a fine career before you." There was a postscript to this letter too. "I just stepped in to No. 20, Belgrave Square, to tell Lady Forrest. She was immensely interested on your account, as no doubt other friends will be." Wynyard missed the postscript at first, and even when his eye fell upon it, on taking up the letter a second time, it did not make much impression, though long afterwards the words came back to his memory with a terrible light upon them.

Apart from the natural sorrow on hearing of the sudden death of a companion of early years, Wynyard was not the sort of man to feel any great elevation of spirits at the news of an unexpected acquisition of riches. He was too much in love with his own plans, too confident in his own powers of making a position

for himself in the world without adventitious help, to escape a twinge of regret when the possibility of carrying them out and achieving his own aims, was thus snatched away. The new career offered him presented its weight of responsibilities first to his mind, and that with crushing effect. It was not until after hours of thought and efforts to calm himself that brighter views began to steal in, and whisperings of new hopes and ambitions to make themselves heard. Alma—he was tempted for a moment to regret that she too would be baffled of her design of giving up the world for love. He should never know now, how bravely she would have met difficulties, how nobly she would have encouraged him to wait patiently for well-earned success, if it had been slow in coming. He had had such dreams about her once, but that was before his confidence in her had been shaken. No, in spite of to-day he could not go back to faith in that reading of her character. The best he could do was to rejoice heartily for her sake that she was spared a trial which might have been too great for her strength, and to resolve not to be over-critical as to the manner in which she should receive the news to-morrow morning. He would not measure the joy and triumph there would surely be on her face as if it afforded any test of the degree in which she valued his possessions above himself.

It was long after he had sought the quaint little bed, prepared for him in an alcove beyond the salon, before he could sleep; but, wearied out at last with the excitement of the day, he slept heavily and long, and the morning light was streaming full into the room when he opened his eyes. It showed him, between the curtains of the alcove, the salon-table still strewn with letters, and the tapestry chair where he had sat last night reading *that* news. He heard voices in the garden below, Alma and Madame de Florimel talking to each other; and all the events of yesterday came back instantaneously and clearly into his mind, one, as it were, balancing and steadying the other. He had awakened into a new existence, and the people around him had something of the aspect of strangers. Alma was his—yes—but he thought of her rather as the future Lady Anstice than as his old love, and he himself was hardly himself—something less, perhaps, than his former self, for the death of poor Ralph who had believed in him as no other, not even his wife, would ever believe in him again. Well, it was late, and there was a great deal to be done; he must start that morning for England, and he had better go down as quickly as possible into the garden where Madame de Florimel was pottering among her vegetables as if it were yesterday, and get over the task of telling his news.

CHAPTER VII.

MY LORD.

This is something like—there is some mettle in these London lords—these sparks know a woman's mind before she speaks it.

THE Château Arnaud garden had not kept even as much pretension to be called a garden as the pleasure-grounds around Madame de Florimel's house at La Roquette. There were a few traces of past grandeur, but utility had long since asserted its supremacy over ornament. Stately terraces and parterres had had their spaces invaded year after year by corn, and vines, and lucerne, till there was nothing to distinguish them from the adjoining field, but here and there a flight of broken, lichen-cruste'd marble steps, or an armless statue, or mutilated fountain basin, which some flowering gourd, or climbing bean-stalk, was making gay and useful at the same time.

Madame de Florimel, in her morning costume, was quite equal to the task of threading her way among the

vine and vegetable patches, without any help of gravelled paths, and found amusement enough in prying into their promise of fruitfulness for the summer ; but Alma soon grew weary of following and listening.

Long before Wynyard made his appearance outside, she had found out the only seat the place afforded. A mossy, carved, stone bench, under a Judas tree at the lowest point of the garden, where the inevitable château pond still existed, and nourished its army of green frogs. It may well have been some patched and powdered pre-revolution beauty, who last, before Alma, sat lazily on that bench in the working hours of a spring morning, waiting for a lazy lover to come to her, and who watched the glowing Judas blossoms overhead, and the green slopes stretching upwards towards a blue sky in front, with as little heed to their beauty as Alma had to give them to-day.

She could not understand Wynyard's long delay in coming out to tell her the news which he surely must have learned by this time. A thousand doubts and misgivings tortured her mind, and made that lovely spring morning, the morning after her betrothal to the man she loved, a time of torment instead of joy. Is one never to be quite happy, she kept asking herself ; is the prospect of success beyond all one's hopes, really worse

to bear, because of the deadly anxiety it brings, than disappointment? She had been reading her father's letter aloud to her mother just before she left the house, and its tone of taking for granted that life was going on as usual with them, had worked her up into a state of unreasonable impatience and irritability. It was a long chatty letter, but there was, from first to last, no allusion in it to Lord Anstice's death, or to Wynyard's changed fortunes. Either her father had not yet heard Constance's news, or he did not believe it, or he passed it over as less likely to affect her and her mother than details about the poor circumstances in which the West children were left by their father's death. Then came the dreaded Kirkman name, and how hard Alma had found it to read aloud the sentence in which it occurred, without faltering or changing countenance!

"I found Horace Kirkman waiting at the house for me when I returned from Saville Street last night. He seemed anxious, and complained bitterly of not having heard anything from any of us for many days. Tell Alma, I think, considering all the circumstances, she ought to write to Mrs. Kirkman, if not to Horace. She must at all events *not* leave the young man on my hands. I have a great deal too much business upon me just

now, public and private, to be complicated with a lover's grievances."

Clearly Alma would get no help from her father in extricating herself from her difficulties in that quarter, though, as she remembered with some bitterness, it was, more than anything else, a word from him that had led her to involve herself with the Kirkmans. If he had not given his support to that intimacy, how much fewer thorns would be in their paths now! And yet, again, was it possible that Constance's news might be a mistake after all? Had young Lawrence brought her a hasty report which had received contradiction before her father arrived in London? Were those letters now lying under the cut corks in Madame Mabile's commode merely proofs of some magazine article, about whose mysterious miscarriage she might have to hear conjectures through years to come?

Alma's face and figure stiffened into an attitude of weary despondency, as this supposition confirmed itself in her mind by many circumstances of Wynyard's conduct last night and this morning. Her enthusiasm of yesterday, when she had longed to sacrifice everything for love, deserted her when the possibility of being called upon to do so, presented itself as close at hand. She could see nothing but irony in the fate which brought

her to take the unprosperous lot at the moment when she had forfeited all claim to inward self-approval for the choice. She must in this case face the Kirkmans' displeasure, without any gilding of success to blind people's eyes in judging her, and bear her mother's disappointment, unsupported by a sound conscience, or by that free-hearted enjoyment of her lover's gratitude, which might have been hers if she had honestly deserved it. Outwardly and inwardly her prospects looked black every way. She had lost her self-respect and gained nothing.

During a pause in counting her artichokes, Madame de Florimel turned round to look at Alma's motionless figure on the garden-seat, and wondered at her apathy. She hardly looked handsome this morning, madame thought, when all animation was banished from her face, and with such an air of indifference, if not of gloom in her attitude. One could no longer feel surprised that she should have a younger sister married before herself, for the sight of one such fit of abstraction, would be enough to frighten away from any man the wish to make her his companion for life. With this conclusion, madame was going back to her artichokes when she saw Wynyard come out of the house, and look round the garden as if in search of someone. She beckoned him

to come and join her, and when his eye persistently looked over her head towards the bench at the bottom of the garden, where Alma was seated, she left her spud sticking in the mould, and hastened up the hill to intercept him. Madame could not bear to lose her last chance of getting a sympathetic listener that morning.

Alma saw the meeting between the two, and interpreted all the little signs afforded by their looks and gestures, as they stood talking together, with anxious heart-throbs. Was it an ordinary conversation about the artichokes and the weather that kept them standing face to face so long on the slope of the hill, or was Wynyard telling his cousin *that* news?

They turned at last to come down the hill, talking as they came—and now madame's hand is on Wynyard's arm, and her face has a startled expression, while his is very grave. The nearer they approached the bench, the stronger grew Alma's hopes that no ordinary topic occupied them. Ah! they pause again close to the Judas tree to shake hands. Madame is looking up at Wynyard with a glance of proud satisfaction that makes Alma's face glow, and changes the fear she has been feeling into a new dread—a dread lest, when the supreme moment of hearing comes, as it must do immediately, she should show too little surprise at the long-expected news, or too

much triumph. Scraps of conversation reach her ears when they move on again.

“Poor Mrs. Anstice!” madame is saying; “no, Wynyard, I don’t forget her grief, though I acknowledge that my first thought was of you. I am myself a mother; I know what her desolation must be. Poor woman! I will not say a single word against your leaving me at once to go to her; and indeed there are other friends whom, at such a crisis in your life, you will be anxious to see at once. May I not say, another friend?”

But Wynyard’s eye had caught Alma’s by this time, and he did not wait to hear the end of madame’s sentence. He hurried forward, his face glowing with sudden emotion, and, taking Alma’s hands in both his, he raised her from the seat, so that they stood together before Madame de Florimel.

“I have another piece of news to tell you this morning,” he began, “of even deeper importance to me than the last, of which Miss Rivers, as yet, knows nothing. You must congratulate me without any reservation this time. Yesterday Miss Rivers and I came to the happy ending of a long wooing, and it is two betrothed people you see before you this morning. You will give us your blessing before any more is said, won’t you?”

There was a moment's profound and embarrassing silence, during which an energetic green frog, croaking in blind forgetfulness of the daylight, and a cicada, half-way up the Judas tree, had the throbbing ears of two anxious auditors all to themselves. Then, madame, her keen grey eyes pitilessly fixed on Alma's face, said interrogatively :

“And Miss Rivers knows nothing as yet of what you told me, while we were walking down the garden?”

“Nothing whatever,” said Wynyard. “I did not know it myself till after we parted last night. Pray don't let us frighten her by growing mysterious.”

He felt Alma's hand tremble and twitch within his own, but he closed his fingers over it and held it firmly, avoiding another look into her face, lest he should increase her agitation, which he tried not to think more overwhelming than the occasion called for.

“Well, then, I will go back to my artichokes, and leave you to tell what will not frighten her, I am sure. It is not news of that sort which makes young ladies take fright at their betrothal.”

“And you congratulate us,” persisted Wynyard. “Come, madame, you are not going to turn crusty with me on the morning when I bring you such tidings as this? You will have to promise to visit us in England

now, and look at the place where your primrose-roots were dug from. You must bring Joseph Marie to study English farming under my uncle's old tenants."

"I am too old for such a journey, and I would not expose either myself or Joseph Marie to ridicule," said madame, shortly. "As for congratulations—yes, Wynyard, I congratulate you, as heartily as I can congratulate your mother's son on an engagement. You must really forgive me if recollections of past times make my manner less cordial than I could wish it to be. In an hour or two, perhaps by the time Miss Rivers has recovered from the shock you are about to give her, my ideas will have arranged themselves, and I shall be equal to speaking as I ought. Meanwhile, I had better, ungracious as the suggestion may sound, see what can be done to hasten your departure, since you are determined, you say, to start in an hour's time."

Madame turned away, and Wynyard led Alma back to the seat under the Judas tree, and placed himself by her side.

For another minute or two the duet between the green frog and the cicada was the only audible sound in the garden.

Wynyard, who had passed his arm round Alma's waist, felt that her heart was beating wildly under his

hand, and her agitation affected him with the chill of reserve. He almost dreaded to end the suspense lest her fear should be succeeded by a burst of relief or joy that would jar upon his present mood.

“Why should she,” he jealously asked himself, “care so agonisingly for anything beyond what was settled yesterday?”

“Well, dearest,” he said at last, “I don’t know what keeps us silent, for there is a great deal to be said, and only an hour to say it in. Why won’t you look at me this morning? Are you angry with me for leaving you so long alone, or have you partly guessed what I have to tell you? I think madame’s talk and manner must have suggested the news to your mind. Can you not guess what has happened?”

“No, no,” Alma whispered breathlessly; “tell me. I cannot guess. I could not bear to guess.”

“You are right,” he said. “Yes, I should be sorry if you had thought of it. It is too sad and terrible a thing to come lightly into one’s mind, and I am forgetting that a few hours have already made it familiar to me, so callous, so full of ourselves are we. I think you only saw my cousin, Ralph Anstice, two or three times; the last time was at Constance’s wedding. You will be greatly shocked to hear that I have had news of his

death. He died quite suddenly, a week ago, and but for our being out of the region of letters, I should have heard sooner. Poor fellow! I wish you had known him better, that you might help me to remember him as affectionately as his kindness for me deserves."

There was a long pause. Alma could not bring herself to utter an exclamation of surprise, or to ask a question about the manner of that death which had constantly been in her thoughts for four days; and when Wynyard, impatient at last, took her chin between his finger and thumb, and turned her face towards himself, he was surprised to see how white it was, even to the lips.

"My darling," he cried, kissing her tenderly, "I did not know that you would feel this so deeply. I ought not to have told you without more preparation. How good and tender-hearted you are, thinking only of the sorrowfulness of this event, and not at all of how it affects ourselves."

"No, not so," cried Alma, wrenching her face away from his touch, with a gesture that was almost fierce. "I wish you would not interpret my feelings for me. I can't bear you to do that; I never could, you know. Let me alone to think and feel in my own way, the only way in which I can feel."

Then, seeing his surprise, she made a great effort to control herself, and added, in a calmer tone :

“I wish you would tell me more about what has happened. Never mind what I am feeling. What does that signify? No one, not even you, can understand that. Tell me the whole of what you have heard, and how your poor young cousin came to be drowned.”

“Well,” he said, without noticing the word “drowned,” which struck him with a stupid surprise that he let pass for the moment, “if you think it reasonable to expect me to remain satisfied with not understanding your feelings, or having any share in them, I will try to go on; or stay, as we seem to have stumbled into a mood of cross-purposes, I will give you young Lawrence’s letter to read, and leave you for a little while to think over it alone. I can’t keep away long though, for I must start for England in another hour; and surely we have, or ought to have, a great deal to say to each other this morning, Alma. Shall I go and find Lady Rivers; she must be expecting me, and I owe her an explanation for yesterday, don’t I?”

“Not yet,” said Alma; “I have not told her yet. Yes, Wynyard, go away for a little while, and come back when I have read the letter.”

He turned away from her, walked a few paces beyond

the Judas tree, and crossing his arms on the low stone wall that divided the garden from the next field, he stood for some minutes watching the progress of a string of migratory caterpillars across the grass, determined not to let his mind fasten on any of the particulars of Alma's conduct, so as to stray into suspicion or discontent at her behaviour on this first morning of feeling her his own. She had taken him generously when he had little to give, and now that the worldly advantages lay all on his side, it would be churlish indeed to begin reckoning up the more or the less love she was likely to give in return for them.

In a shorter time than seemed necessary to read through the letters he had given her, Alma beckoned him back to the seat under the Judas tree. Lawrence's letter lay folded in her lap, her hands crossed over it. She had only read one sentence, the sentence in which Lawrence mentioned his visit to Constance, and it was with a great effort she now turned a wistful glance at Wynyard's face, dreading, yet longing to read his thought. Could he have taken in that part of the letter, and yet be so stupid, or so loyal, as not to doubt her in the least?

"Well," he said, taking her hand, and smiling in answer to her questioning look, "do we want a fresh

introduction to each other, dear, or what? Is an unexpected inheritance such a very alarming thing that you can't recollect anything else about me than that? Not, for instance, that I am going away in an hour, and that it will be a week or two before we shall sit together again?"

She coloured, and left her hand passive in his, but the anxious expression remained on her face. Difficulty after difficulty, which her previous knowledge of Lord Anstice's death would surely bring her into, occurred to her busy mind, and crowded out all the tender and loving thoughts that would have been natural to the occasion.

"There are some things that I can't bear," she exclaimed, vehemently, after a long silence.

"So long as you don't tell me that I am one——"

Wynyard interrupted.

She shook her head.

"No, no, I am in earnest; you must let me speak."

"And you must let me say first that from to-day you shall never, if I can help it, have anything to do with these unbearable things, unless indeed," he added, playfully, "*I am* one of them, which I shall begin to think, if you won't look at me."

"No, no—oh Wynyard, it is hard enough for me to

say this without looking. What I feel I can't bear this morning, is the being left here with mamma after you are gone, to hear all that Madame de Florimel will say about our engagement, and my mother's talk when this news is broken to her. How little Madame de Florimel and she will understand each other. How grieved I should be if madame should guess the difference that——”

“Poor Ralph's death makes in your mother's estimation of me as a son-in-law, in fact,” said Wynyard, concluding the sentence over which she hesitated.

“You must not blame poor mamma for that.”

“And I do not, dearest. It is very natural, and you may depend on my burying all recollection of old slights, and taking the future complaisance I suppose I may reckon on, in good part for your sake. You have made all that easy to me. While I have the recollection of our yesterday's walk by the river to prove that you took me for myself, what care I for other people's way of looking at me ! Alma, you don't know how precious it is to me that your yielding came first. Nay, give me one of your own frank smiles at last, dearest, and let me read in your eyes the same thankfulness with which my heart overflows. I suppose I am naturally of a jealous temper, and the experiences of my first reverse of fortune have embittered me. If you had not shown me the truth and

constancy of your heart yesterday, I might, I don't say I should, but I might have been so mad as never to have sought to learn it."

She tried to give him the response he asked for, but there was far more shame than joy in the tear-filled eyes, and on the trembling lips she raised to his face. Even while he kissed the tears away, a bitter impatience against his persistent dwelling on her disinterestedness, as a chief claim to his love, gnawed at her heart. She soon drew herself away from him.

"I must go to mamma," she said, "for I think you mean to let me do as I wish, and leave the château this morning, and our preparations must be begun at once. Mamma did not sleep well last night, and does not find herself comfortable in this tumble-down old house, which, she says, is full of strange noises. She will catch at the idea of escape when I tell her that you are going, and that we may make this an excuse for taking the carriage on to Aix les Bains at once, instead of resting here. You must make the best excuse for us you can to Madame de Florimel. I don't think she will be very sorry to miss our company as things stand now."

Wynyard found madame impenetrable, and disposed to be sarcastic, and, though sorry to part with her in such a mood, he was on the whole relieved that no further

opportunity was given him for explanations or remonstrances that might have become embarrassing. He did not want to have Emmie West's name brought into the talk between them, and was still less disposed to receive further enlightenment as to Madame de Florimel's reasons for the distrust of Alma, which she hardly restrained within bounds of polite willingness to "speed a parting guest."

However, Madame de Florimel's manner softened at the last moment when the carriage was packed, and Wynyard came back from placing Alma in it, to repeat his hope that his cousin would be persuaded to visit Leigh some early day after he had taken up his abode there. Her eyes, which had been quite dry hitherto, suddenly filled with tears as she wrung his hand a second time.

"I am an old fool," she said, "and one would think I was twenty instead of sixty, to be ready, as I was a minute ago, to quarrel with the single member I have left of my own family, connecting me with my old English home, just from the feeling of partisanship with—well, we won't say whose cause. I suppose as long as there are young people in the world I care for, I shall want to have a finger in arranging their love affairs for them, and be bitter against them when they shut their eyes to

their own good. I was made so—and—yes, after all the disappointments I have seen, I should have liked luck in the shape of a true love to have come into the old house at last; but there, you are your mother's own son, Wynyard, and I don't know that you deserved better fortune in that way than the rest of us."

Here Alma called from the carriage, and Madame de Florimel, releasing Wynyard's hand, turned to mount the shallow, winding steps, leading to the upper story of the old house. With the vanishing of her slim, upright figure, the place all at once lost its aristocratic air, and sank down into a mere little wayside inn, with wine-carts and wood-waggons thronging the back regions, and a buzz of country business about the tree-shaded front door.

Wynyard could almost have fancied that a dream had vanished suddenly, and that all the emotions of the last twenty-four hours would pass away with it. A conviction of the reality of his own new importance came back to him, however, as soon as he was seated in the carriage, and the bustle of the departure was over. Lady Rivers's "altered eye," and the eager deferential gesture with which she made room for him to sit by her side, was as potent as a proclamation of heralds to impress his new rank on his consciousness. A real earl, and one of the

richest in England, whom she had perhaps lost for her daughter through lack of fore-knowledge of what was about to happen—good heavens, could one be humble and repentant enough! The trembling fingers she laid on his arm to keep him near her when, in dread of what was coming, Wynyard drew back and muttered something about changing places with Ward on the box, had a volume of deprecation and eager apology in their clinging touch, and they could not be shaken off while Alma looked on. He had to resign himself to the front seat, and was compelled to listen to an avalanche of congratulations, explanations, flatteries, false colouring of past events, in endless repetitions, which flowed on through the whole day's drive, and broke out again, *à propos* of some new topic, as often as he thought he had quenched them, by turning the conversation to non-personal matters.

CHAPTER VIII.

MAGNA EST VERITAS.

And I can teach thee, coz, to shame the devil,
By telling truth : Tell truth and shame the devil.

It is strange how soon when one phase of life is irrevocably broken up, breaking, as we may say, hearts with it, the shattered elements arrange themselves in a new order. The revolving wheel of moments, hours, days moves on a little more or less smoothly, but taking up the old tune, and carrying us forward to ends which, by-and-by, engage our thoughts with almost the same intensity as did those that we have had to abandon for ever.

During the first weeks after her husband's death Mrs. West could hardly have believed that she should ever again set her heart strongly on an earthly good; that any plan of life would be personally very preferable to her beyond another when he on whom all her anxiety had so long been fixed, had passed out of her sight. It was

not very long, however, not a month after the funeral, before a new hope began to grow up in her mind, and shed an unexpected light on the dark future. When Sir Francis made his hasty evening visits to talk over her affairs, and sat provokingly business-like, with papers spread before him, making dismal calculations which always had the same poverty-stricken results, she would sit by, dry-eyed and acquiescent; she listened to his plans in a half-dreamy way as to something quite remote from herself and her children, fixing her thoughts all the while on the young sprouts of that new hope which, each day, seemed to grow stronger and more beautiful. Emmie go out as governess in a family, recommended by Mrs. Kirkman—the two younger boys be sent away to a cheap, distant boarding-school, while she and Mildie settled in a lodge-cottage at the gates of the Rivers's country-house, to nurse their poverty in the sight of the other family's riches! If it had been the will of God, of course one could walk through such a valley of humiliation, thankful for shelter and food and such scraps of kindness from one's prosperous relatives as might come; if—but here Mrs. West always smiled faintly to herself, and looked across the room at Emmie. She thought she knew for certain that this valley of humiliation was not God's will for her and her children,—nor Dr. Urquhart's.

There had not been a single word said. Dr. Urquhart came less frequently than formerly into the rooms the Wests continued to occupy, he was apparently afraid of intruding upon them now that the entire house had passed into his ownership. Emmie, too, was less often invited to spend an evening in the Land of Beulah, and when an invitation came she generally excused herself, and sent delighted Mildie to study the microscope and read the "Encyclopædia Britannica" in her stead.

Mrs. West could not make out that her eldest daughter and Dr. Urquhart had ever had more than five minutes' conversation since Emmie's return from abroad; and yet the secret hope grew and grew, and was the ever-widening foundation on which all her plans for the future were built. Was it an electric glance of sympathy exchanged between the two mothers that had conveyed this certainty to Mrs. West, or was it some still more subtle inflowing of knowledge, such as will sometimes pass between persons interested in the same object, when a strong hope exists in one resolute heart? No one knew how much Emmie read the thoughts and hopes of which she was thus made the passive centre. Nothing had been said, scarcely anything looked—a kind of lull and hush of expectation pervaded the house.

Uncle Rivers came and went, and talked about

another quarter-day being close at hand, and brought measurements of the rooms in the cottage, and even patterns of wall-papers for Mrs. West to choose from; but no one showed any interest in these things. Even old Mary Ann went on with the summer cleaning of her kitchen, as if she had no more idea of ever moving out, than she had had any time this last twenty years.

July stole away, and now it was the end of August. Uncle Rivers would be leaving London in another ten days or so, and yet no one seemed in a hurry to settle anything. Emmie had a little fit of impatience sometimes, and felt a longing to struggle against this quiet onflowing of the days, as if the hours, as they slipped by, were weaving a spell round her which would become too strong for resistance if she did not rise up against it soon. She exhaled this impatience chiefly in solitary paces up and down the deserted attic rooms, and in short fits of tears when she could find a few safe minutes for weeping, without fear of provoking after remark. Any talk might have brought the suspense to an end, and Emmie did not feel ready for that yet. When Mrs. West, during the interviews with Uncle Rivers, looked across the room at her with a confiding smile on her lip which had more of appeal in it than the most moving words, Emmie kept her eyes safely glued to her work. Her

heart swelled and her lips and eyelids trembled just to give the answering glance that was implored from her, but she restrained herself. An answering smile just then would mean so much, involve such a large promise—her whole life—and she could not take it back, if she had offered it to her mother, by so much only as a smile. Something withheld her constantly from giving that silent pledge.

Mrs. Urquhart meanwhile was more content with Emmie than she had been on her return home. Confidence is contagious, and sanguine-tempered people fall easily into the hopes of those they love, even against their better judgment, and Mrs. Urquhart had come to see all her son's arrangements with regard to the West family in such an amiable light that she could not help expecting them to come about sooner or later. Perhaps Emmie's coyness in the matter of her son's wooing was not altogether so displeasing in reality, as in theory it would have been. Mrs. Urquhart began to regard it as a decent diffidence to accept an undeserved honour, and to value Emmie all the more for her discerning humility. Emmie felt the silent pressure of expectation even more strongly in Mrs. Urquhart's presence than in her mother's, and was obliged to watch opportunities for flights to the attic, past the open drawing-room door,

feeling it now an entrance into the stronghold of her enemies, instead of the gate to the heavenly hills as it had formerly been. From the Land of Beulah to the remotest kitchen regions the same oppressive atmosphere pervaded the house, the same anxious expectant looks were turned upon her, claiming from her something that she was not able to give—wealth from an empty purse, water from a vessel which had been drained to its last drop.

It was only in the deserted attics, from which Christabel's easel and Katherine's desk had been long since sent away, that Emmie was able to breathe and think freely. She had all her life been better at feeling than at reasoning, and the problem rose before her in all sorts of confused and confusing forms, and had to be settled and resettled on very different counts each day. There were remorseful impulses which urged her towards the solution that would win her mother's gratitude, and put a happy termination to the family difficulties. "What was her own life," she sometimes asked herself, "compared to the good of all the others?" If she could make anyone happy, she who had made so great a mistake as to give her heart too hastily, why should she not do what she could? She knew she should feel deep gratitude to anyone who would love her, and she might love again, in

a way, by-and-by. What really withheld her was an instinct of honesty and purity, rather than any counter-reasoning against this specious appearance of duty that so often presented itself.

When, one day, Mildie put into words this secret instinct, it came upon Emmie almost as a new truth, bringing unexpected strength and light. Mildie was a frequent visitor to the empty attics, for Katherine had left her a legacy of old schoolbooks, too dilapidated to bear a second packing. When she found Emmie there, she generally made a great show of not taking any notice of her. She settled herself ostentatiously with her Greek Grammar in her lap, turned her face to the wall against which her treasures were piled, and began to repeat *τύπτω, τύπτεις, τύπτει*, under her breath. It was a grievance to Emmie to have her solitary retreat invaded, and yet perhaps she received some bracing influence from the sight of that square-set, resolute figure crouched in the dust, murmuring monotonous words over and over in a tone that had a subdued relish about it.

One day Mildie found an opportunity of speaking a word or two that acted like a healthy wind in clearing Emmie's atmosphere. Mildie had borrowed a volume of Dr. Urquhart's *Encyclopædia*, and, presuming basely on the complaisance with which the whole

family were treated (for learning may as well get its little bit of advantage out of love follies when it can), carried it up into the attic for thorough enjoyment. On coming suddenly into the room she found Emmie standing by a table on which the book lay open, apparently reading a page. Could Emmie have taken such a sensible turn as to be reading the "Encyclopædia Britannica" by way of comfort? Alas! no. A second glance assured Mildie that she was not reading, but—oh, sacrilege—crying over the beautiful, creamy, double-margined page, actually letting slow tears fall one by one on the book itself! Mildie's exclamation of horror sent Emmie, penitent and shamefaced, to the window to wipe her tears away, and Mildie, after tenderly performing the same office for the insulted book, propped her elbows on the table and read on the tear-wet leaf, "The history of the edible green frog," over which Emmie had been weeping so profusely. When she had satisfied her thirst for knowledge, she began to wonder a little about these tears, whose traces would always distinguish the frog's biography from that of every other reptile in the volume. As she mused, piecing together little links of past observations, and arriving swiftly at a conclusion by true inductive method, a fire kindled within her, and she spoke out, taking care to make the

words distinct enough for Emmie to hear, without turning her head round.

“If I were you,” she began, resolving to avoid any mention of names that might be too startling for Emmie’s modesty, “If I were you, I should just tell *him* the whole truth. It is the only fair thing to do, however much it may vex him, and in fact bother us all just now. Oh, yes, I know it will be bad enough for mamma and everyone; I know I shall hate living in that cottage close to the Rivers’s horridly enough, unless Mrs. Kirkman’s cousin would have the sense to take me for a governess instead of you. However, it’s not *me* that’s of consequence, and you are thinking, I know, that you are of no consequence either, and that you ought to do what is best for mamma and the children, without considering yourself. But look here, Emmie, you *must* tell him the whole truth. I can’t put it any better, but it seems to me that it would be such a mean thing to take the Encyclopædia and the house and everything that he has, and himself too, as far as that goes, and—well—not to tell him the whole truth. He might marry you if he liked afterwards, you know. But I don’t think,” fixing her eyes on the tear-blister, “that he would. Why should he? What would be the use of marrying a person to make her unhappy, and have her crying over

his best books? No, Emmie dear, don't begin to cry again; I've done now, and I don't want you to speak a word to me ever about it, but just remember, there's one person in the family who will always stand up for you if you will speak the truth, and I'll go and be governess to Mrs. Kirkman's cousin instead of you, if that will make it any easier."

Mildie shut the Encyclopædia and marched off without waiting for an answer, but when she and Emmie met again at the dining-room door just before tea-time, Emmie surprised her by stooping down and kissing her cheek softly as they entered the room together.

After tea Emmie took the wall-paper patterns from the chimney-piece, and began to turn them over, and ask her mother's and Harry's opinion as to which pattern would best match with the old furniture, and make the little cottage-parlour look most homelike.

"Roses! had not Uncle Rivers said there were roses on the trellis outside—monthly roses that peeped in at the windows all the year round." Emmie's voice shook as she pronounced the word "roses" the first time, but it grew stronger as she went on talking; and, though Mrs. West took out her pocket-handkerchief and could not bring herself to say that the rose-bud pattern was at all pretty, the subject had been broached, and when

bedtime came, everybody felt that an important step towards settling the family affairs had been taken that evening.

When a current of feeling sets definitely towards a certain course it generally happens that succeeding events are found to bring new forces to sustain and swell it. Thus it happened to Emmie that the very day after she had made her first feeble effort, an unexpectedly strong support in the resolution she had taken, came to her. There was a letter waiting for her on the breakfast-table when she came downstairs next morning, whose appearance startled her as much as the sight of a full-blown rose in an open garden during a snow-storm, or the face of a person who had been dead a year, might have done. One is never in a hurry to open a letter that arrives very long after it is due, when all hope and expectation about it have died down into ashes in one's heart. An untimely comer like that is sure to bring renewal of pain, and had best be faced with deliberation. With this conviction Emmie put the letter into her pocket and left it there while she despatched the various items of household business that now fell to her share in the mornings. Later in the day she took it up to "Air Throne," to read it where no eyes were upon her. It was a short letter, dashed off, she felt by instinct, in a

mood where resolution was mixed in some sort with impatience and pain :

“MY DEAR MISS WEST,

“Will you believe, I wonder, that the recollection of a letter of yours, left unanswered, has been a standing grievance and remorse to me for many months. Why did I not answer it? you will ask. Well, chiefly because I thought I had no right to impose on you the task of keeping a secret which I must have told you if I had written, and which a person, whose equal concern it is, had decided to keep silence upon for a while. My tongue is loosened now, and I will tell you at once that I am engaged, have been engaged for nearly four months, to your cousin, Alma Rivers, and that we shall probably be married very shortly after her return to England in September. The wedding will be in London; but Lady Rivers is coming with her daughter to Leigh for a short visit first, and I am trying to persuade Madame de Florimel to meet them there, and remain to stand by me on the great day. Up to the present moment, I am sorry to say, she remains obstinate against leaving her vineyards at La Roquette to ripen without the help of her watching. This is all preliminary to the real object of my letter, which I find must after all be entered upon bluntly, if

entered upon at all. I am guilty towards you in another matter than that of the long-unanswered letter, and I have reflected that since, if I had injured or misled a man in a small thing or a great, I should owe it to him to acknowledge my fault in so many words, I owe the same openness to you, though in matters of feeling between men and women such outspokenness is not, I believe, usual. I think it ought to be. If I blunder in writing this and make my fault worse, forgive me. It is written in utter reverence for your sincerity and purity of nature; from a conviction that with such as you, truth never rankles as does falsehood or misunderstanding. Let us face the truth together then. I made a mistake last spring in letting you see feelings which, though very real at the time, were hasty, and awakened during a misconception of the position in which I stood towards another person. What I have to say is, don't let your belief in truth and sincerity, or, above all, in your own worth, be lessened through my fault. I submit that I ought to be lowered in your estimation. You cannot suppose my esteem for you greater than it is, and the false colouring came through me. I know your disposition to undervalue yourself, and I also know from past experience how prone we 'Air people' are, when the light of life happens to burn low, to translate everything into excuses

for self-torture and self-contempt. That is why I have ventured on a confession of sins which may perhaps make it clearer to you than your humility would otherwise allow, on whose shoulders the blame of our spoilt spring memories falls. When the shadow has quite passed away from them, we shall meet on the friendly old footing. Meanwhile I have had a long letter from my friend Casabianca, and I am glad to find that he has sensible views upon the rabbit-warrens at Leigh, and considers that next Christmas holidays will be a suitable season for his introduction to their numerous population; we shall perhaps be able to persuade your mother to journey northwards earlier than that. You see I count so certainly on your forgiveness that I look forward to being received as a useful cousin by all the members of your family by-and-by.

“Always yours,

“WYNYARD ANSTICE.”

Emmie folded up the letter and put it back into its envelope long before the half-hour she had given herself for solitude was over, and when Mildie came upstairs to look for her, she found her on her knees in a corner, turning over Katherine Moore's legacy of books, to choose such as were worth carrying away for Sidney's

and Mildie's use at the cottage. "For," she observed, in answer to Mildie's exclamation of wonder, "if we are to make ready for the sale and to pack up in ten days, it is quite time that we set ourselves to work in earnest."

Mildie took the books out of her sister's hands, declaring that this sort of thing was her business; but her eyes followed Emmie about the room while she dragged forward the old furniture which had served the Moores, and wondered whether mamma could get reconciled to using it at the cottage.

"Ah, here is the skeleton's box," Emmie said; "we will make a cover for it out of the old school-room curtains, and put it in the bow-window Uncle Rivers talked about, for a seat. It will remind you of the Moores, and of the evening when we all sat talking round their fire before I went to Eccleston Square."

Mildie could scarcely believe her ears when Emmie made this allusion to the past; it was the first she had been heard to utter since their troubles began. Something had certainly changed her, Mildie thought; her lips actually wore a smile, sad, perhaps, but not down-hearted, and her face and figure, as she stood in the sunlight, had an alertness and life which had been sadly wanting of late. Mildie, who had her fancies at times, in spite of her devotion to the *Encyclopædia*, thought

that her sister looked just then like a slender monthly rose-tree that, after being beaten about and drenched in a storm, raises its branches, and opens its wet blossoms to the comforting of the first sunbeam.

Later on in the day, after a great deal of business had been got through, Emmie took out her letter again and read it once more. It had done her quite as much good as the writer hoped it would, and he had shown his knowledge of her nature, if not of the female heart in general, by writing. To Emmie there was an immense strength and rest in that one clear word spoken. She had been tormenting herself with the self-blame and indefinable shame, which enters so largely into the pain women feel, when they have given more or less love in return for a seeking which has not had its legitimate conclusion. A true word would often do much to dispel this torture, to put things in their real light, and give them their true proportion ; an honest word of explanation or confession, recognising the woman's right to be surprised or wounded, and her just claim to be treated seriously in the most serious matter of her life. Emmie had got this honest word, so seldom, in such circumstances, offered, and though it left everything just as it was before, and had not removed a single thorn from the path before her, it had altered the whole complexion of her thought, and

made quite bearable what had once seemed an overwhelming pain. She read her letter straight through once more in the twilight, while her mother was downstairs talking to Sir Francis Rivers; then she locked it up in her desk, in a secret drawer, seldom opened, resolving, as she did so, that she would not be ashamed of having loved a generous man who acknowledged that he had sought her too hastily, and who was not to blame for the change of circumstances that had drifted them apart. She could soon learn now to look back, without regret, on something that might have been, but which was not ordered, and therefore could not have been best. And since she knew now, by experience, that truth did not rankle, like mistakes or misunderstanding, she determined that she would act on this knowledge, and tell the whole truth, however hard it might be to speak it, when an occasion came.

During the following week, while preparations for the removal and the sale went on, Emmie began to hope that the dreaded occasion would not come. It was a miserable, hurried, tearful, noisy time, and did not need any fresh complications to make it worse. The boys were at home for the autumn holidays, and could not be restrained from getting a good deal of boisterous fun out of the topsy-turvy state of the house, or from dragging forward recovered

treasures, with inconvenient reminiscences of the jolly time "when this was new." These reminiscences would often send Mrs. West back into a tearful state of clinging affection to impracticable articles of furniture, just when Harry and Mildie had brought her to see that the selection of goods must be made on strict principles of suitability to their new home, and not with regard to the memories connected with them—that, for example, a bureau six feet wide might have belonged to Mr. West's grandfather, and held his school letters for thirty years, and would, nevertheless, not fit into a two-feet recess in the cottage. On these occasions Mrs. Urquhart was the great resource, and constantly had to be fetched, to administer advice and comfort. Emmie was obliged to consent to her being summoned, though her conscience smote her sorely every time, for she felt that the style of reasoning which brought Mrs. West round, and induced her to allow the household god in question to be marked with the fatal ticket, ought to draw forth a protest from her which she never could bring herself to speak. "What does it matter?" Mrs. Urquhart would say, encouragingly. "Yes, yes, my dear Mrs. West, let the man put the bureau, and even Mr. West's arm-chair, and the nursery cupboard you bought when Harry was six weeks old, into the sale-list;

it will be quite easy for Graham to buy in anything you particularly fancy when the time comes. You have only just to give him a hint, and he will manage it all for you. He is used to managing.” And then there would be a triumphant glance towards Emmie, and she felt that, let her look as gravely irresponsive as she might, Mrs. Urquhart’s confidence in Graham’s power to manage all things as he wished, was not in the least shaken.

Everyone was to leave the house the day before the sale; Dr. and Mrs. Urquhart on a flying visit into Devonshire, and the Wests to Eccleston Square, where they were to remain during Lady Rivers’s and Alma’s absence at Leigh, till the arrangements for their final departure from London were completed. Casabianca was not above consoling himself with vaunts about the grandeur of Eccleston Square, when his friend, Tom Winter, came to say good-bye, and, in consequence, had his ears boxed by poor Harry, who was too sore at heart on that last evening to give in to any nonsense. Emmie came to the door of Iduna’s Grove at the sound of contention, and looked in, meaning to remonstrate; but the sight of Harry’s set face, and of Casabianca sobbing under the table, for he had only blustered, poor boy, to keep up a sinking heart a few moments longer, sent her silently away. If Harry were to say anything to her—

he had been very good hitherto, and had only once remarked casually, that for aught he could see, Dr. Urquhart was as good a fellow as any going—if he should begin to urge anything upon her, on this last evening of coming home to his own house, Emmie did not know what promises she might not be induced to make. Sir Francis Rivers was in the dining-room, sympathetic, but evidently very glad that it had come to the last day, and that the press of disagreeable business was nearly over for him. He hailed Emmie from the hall, and though he could not fail to see the tears in her eyes, he looked at her with that same complacent expression with which other people plagued her. Not that *he* was thinking of Dr. Urquhart; he had given up all hope of Dr. Urquhart from the moment when he had received definite orders for the printing of the sale bills, but, lurking in a corner of his mind, he had a little scheme of his own invention, which struck him as so clever, and yet at the same time so strange for him to have thought of, that he could not help smiling to himself whenever it recurred to him.

“Ah, little woman,” he said, chucking Emmie under her pretty dimpled chin, “you have no idea what a battle I have just come out of on your account. I have bearded an angry lioness enraged on behalf of her only cub ;

yes, bearded her in her own golden cage, that I never thought to enter again, and would not, to serve anyone but you. Such an avalanche of words, such a fluttering of enormous fans, such a slamming of doors in my face by gorgeous footmen! You guess rightly—Mrs. Kirkman; but don't look frightened, my dear, it's all right, and I ought not to say a word. She has a right to be very angry, poor woman, and I have found her more reasonable about you than might have been expected. You always have pleased her fancy it seems, and, however much her opinion of your relations has changed, you are of another sort, she opines, from your despicable kindred in Eccleston Square, and she is not disposed to withdraw her recommendation. You are to have the honour of governing her cousin's children all the same. Who knows what may come of it, eh, Emmie?"

"The Christopher Kirkmans live a long way off," put in Mrs. West, mournfully, "and Emmie has never lived in the north; I wonder how the climate will agree with her?"

"Your own county," cried Sir Francis. "It will be native air to her; and the elder Kirkmans have a place near Wigton, where they will probably spend the autumn. I have done the best I could for you, and I should not wonder if Emmie acknowledges some

day that my plans work better than her aunt's, after all."

Sir Francis finished his cup of tea, and took his departure soon after this. The house began to grow dusky, for no one had the heart to light the gas, only to show the tickets on the furniture and the sorrowful signs of speedy departure lurking everywhere. In the Land of Beulah alone all remained as spruce and bright as usual, and Mrs. Urquhart and Graham had lighted the chandelier and were taking their tea as if nothing particular was to happen to-morrow morning.

Emmie stood at the curtainless dining-room window, watching the gas-lamps in the street as they started into radiance one after the other under the touch of the lamp-lighter's wand. Whilst she was recalling the days when every evening before going to bed, she and Harry used to climb the dining-room chairs to see this grand sight, with faint delightful sensations of awe, as at something magical and unexplained, her mother came in softly, and stood beside her.

"Darling," she whispered, putting an arm round her waist, "I did not like you to be startled, so I came in first to prepare you a little. Dr. Urquhart has asked if he may come and speak to you this evening, and I said

that you were alone in the dining-room. Was I right? Emmie dear, he has been very good to us all."

"Yes," said Emmie, after a moment's pause, "he has been good to us, he is a good friend; but, please, I will go myself and speak to him in the Land of Beulah; I won't give him the trouble of coming down here."

Mrs. West had knowledge enough of heart affairs to perceive that there was no good augury for Dr. Urquhart in this, and unconsciously she tightened her clasp of Emmie's waist, till it became an almost despairing clutch. She had so hoped that this support was going to be the prop for all their fallen fortunes; it was very hard to give up the last hope, yet she spoke in all sincerity from the depths of her yearning mother's heart when she said in faltering tones: "You know, darling, there is nothing I care for so much as your happiness."

"Yes, I know," Emmie whispered.

"I am very anxious you should judge rightly what is best for yourself, and for us all in this matter. There is no one else who loves you?"

"No," said Emmie, meekly, "no one else."

"Then, my dear, think a little. We have known him so long, and he is very good and kind, and he would be such a friend and protector for the boys.

Dearest, I can enter into your feelings, for I know how it was with me when my mother came, in a day of trouble like this in my old home, and told me that Mr. West was in the drawing-room, and that he had made a very handsome offer to my father about me. I don't mind now telling you, Emmie, that it was not exactly what I had been expecting, and I had at first a little, just a little, struggle with myself. Yet you know how it all turned out, and how united we were. I don't think he ever felt any want of duty or love in me, through all our years of trial. Look back as far as you can recollect, dear child: there was never any strife in our home, was there? I have failed in many things, but I don't think I could have done more for him, or lived in greater peace, if I had begun by being ever so much, what foolish people call, in love."

Mrs. West drew Emmie's head down upon her shoulder as she finished speaking. Listening thus to her mother's anxious heart-beats, Emmie *did* look back through the years. She followed herself in thought backwards to earliest, earliest recollections of father and mother, trying hard to see what her mother wanted her to see, for just then she wished to yield, her mother's pleading had touched her so closely. Why was it that the pictures, as they rose, *would* convey warning rather

than encouragement? Certainly there had been peace in the house, but had it not been a dead sort of peace? Emmie remembered days, before their troubles began, when the children and their mother had had merry games together in this very room, in the twilight, and how all the noise and mirth and chatter had died out when papa's knock was heard at the door. It was the master of the house who entered always, and everybody was ready to wait upon him; but the gaiety and fun and endearments of the previous hours were put away. Harry and she used to wonder whether papa might not have been better pleased if mamma had laughed and talked with him as she did to them, instead of becoming so grave and silent all at once. When the troubles came, if there had been warmth and life in the house as well as duty and peace—such warmth, such life as strong mutual love can create—would poverty have seemed so very terrible? Could her father have felt that all his self-respect and dignity were gone when his riches failed him, if there had ever been a time when love had crowned him king? Emmie was not judging her mother, who had given all that was in her power to give. There had been nothing wrong, except, perhaps, the *yielding*, which Emmie herself had been very near to, a minute ago.

“Mamma,” she said at last, “if papa had never had any troubles, should you have been quite happy?”

“The troubles were needed,” Mrs. West answered, “and—yes—they drew us closer together. I don’t deny, dear, that we might never have understood one another so well, if we had remained prosperous always.”

“But perhaps Dr. Urquhart will never have any troubles. He will be always bright and confident, and full of things as he is now. Mamma, let me go upstairs, please, and don’t be angry with me if, when I have told him the whole truth, it is settled in the way you do not wish.”

Mrs. Urquhart and Graham were very much surprised when Emmie appeared at the drawing-room door, looking, Mrs. Urquhart said afterwards, very much as if she had come to have a tooth out, the silly, frightened child. Mrs. Urquhart thought that Mrs. West had blundered the message, and she was disposed, as she gathered up her knitting to chuckle inwardly at the thought of Emmie’s after confusion, when she found she had come upstairs to have an offer made to her. Graham, however, bit his lip, and in spite of his confidence and his cheery temper, turned almost as white as Emmie when he saw who it was that was standing in the doorway. He felt in an instant what a different thing a talk

in his mother's brightly-lighted drawing-room would be from that interview in the twilight downstairs, for which he had prepared himself.

Emmie was the most self-possessed of the three, as she stood, her hands clasped before her, and said, looking appealingly at Mrs. Urquhart: "Mamma told me you wished to see me, and so I have come up myself to say good-bye to you both this last evening. I did not want to give you the trouble of coming downstairs."

"My dear! I have not been thinking of coming downstairs," answered Mrs. Urquhart, implacably. "I was just going into the next room to fetch a fresh strip of knitting. There, there, sit down in my chair, my dear! Make yourself comfortable till I come back. I don't like to hear of last evenings, and don't mean to believe in them."

Emmie's eyes wistfully followed Mrs. Urquhart strewing her worsted balls in a long train as she went, but there was no going back now, and it would soon be over. She did not even regret that she had come when she saw how agitated Dr. Urquhart grew, and how rapidly he thrust his fingers through his hair, to get himself ready to begin. In the Land of Beulah, which had so often been a haven of rest to her, she felt that she should have courage to remain faithful. She would not

be the one to bring the shadow which had brooded over the rest of the house in here.

Dr. Urquhart soon took courage to come a little nearer, and stood facing her, while she sat motionless looking down at her clasped hands. He wished that the dear, dark-fringed eyelids would tremble a little, or the sweet lips part into ever such a faint smile; it was so hard to speak to such a seemingly motionless statue.

“Miss West,” he began at last; he would have called her “Emmie” in the twilight downstairs, but seated in his mother’s chair, with the full gaslight on her face, she was much more formidable. His natural hopefulness came to his aid, however, and the plunge once made, he pleaded his cause fluently enough, telling how he had begun by watching her, and thinking about her, and how the knowledge that she was his love had flashed full grown into his mind one evening, and had never been absent one moment since, from his thoughts and his purposes. It was a little love history that might well have won a girl’s ear; but Emmie was not exactly listening to it, she was so wishing that the end would come, and, almost against her will, recalling another face and another voice, that had softened in speaking to her—not so true, alas! but ah, how much more dear! She wished Dr. Urquhart would not seem

to think that nothing was necessary but to convince her of the truth of his love, as if hers was due in return, as a matter of course. Why would he take it for granted that to be very much loved by someone was all that a woman could possibly want? It made the explanation that must soon be entered upon, much more difficult.

At length it came to the question needing an answer.

“Since I love you so well, will you not be my wife, and make us all happy?”

Then Emmie’s dark eyelashes trembled, and she raised her eyes to his, frightened, but resolute.

“I will tell you the whole truth.”

“Yes, do,” he said, as yet not alarmed, confident even, that a true-hearted confession, if it did begin with a few difficulties, would only lead to victory in the end. “There is nothing I wish so much as that we should be quite open with each other; I have told you how I came to love you, and that it is the only love that ever has entered or shall enter my heart.”

“But I am so sorry,” said Emmie, her uplifted eyes now filling with tears, “I am so sorry, for, Dr. Urquhart, I don’t love you, though I know how kind you are, and how happy it would make mamma, and how good it

would be for everyone if I did. It is very ungrateful of me, but I must tell you the truth, must I not ? ”

“ But your mother—— ”

“ Yes,” said Emmie, sorrowfully, “ I am afraid mamma misled you a little ; I ought to have spoken to her sooner, but I will tell you the truth. Sometimes, while we have all been so unhappy, and there has been talk of our leaving London, I have thought of saying ‘ yes,’ if you asked me, just to make a home for mamma, and my brothers and sister ; but you would not like it to be in that way, would you ? ”

Emmie turned her eyes away as she finished speaking, unable to bear the sight of the sudden pallor and anguish that overspread the face into which she had been looking. She heard some quick, gasping breaths, and saw that Dr. Urquhart raised his hand to the chimney-piece to steady himself. After a while he said in a hoarse voice——

“ But are you sure,—think again ; are you *sure* that it was only for your mother’s and sister’s sake ? Is my love nothing to yourself—*nothing at all* ? Think again—you cannot mean quite that.”

“ Oh ! I am sorry, I am sorry ! ” groaned Emmie ; “ but there is no use in my thinking again. I have thought so much about it already, and I do mean what I

have said. I am telling you the real truth—I thought I ought. Please do not be unhappy, I am not worth so much regret. I am a very silly girl, and full of fancies——”

“Fancies—you mean that there is someone else,—but does he love you as I do?”

“No,” said Emmie, covering her face with her hands, “he does not love me at all. Don’t let us talk of that. I told you, to show you that you must not waste any more thought on me; but nobody else will ever know. Let me go downstairs now to mamma. You don’t know how hard it has been to me to tell you this.”

The colour came back into Dr. Urquhart’s face, and there was a strange flashing in his eyes of mingled tears, and burning, indignant anger. The man who had trifled with Emmie West’s love would not have been in a very good position if he had come before him just then. It was all he could do to prevent himself from bursting forth into execration; it seemed such a cruel, miserable thing to have won her from him for nothing.

Emmie got up in the silence that followed, and held out her hand to say good-bye. He took it, but could not let it go again immediately. He knew that it was almost as bad as inflicting unnecessary torture on a suffering creature to go on questioning her, and yet with

the prospect of to-morrow's departure, and of the utter emptiness in the house, and in his heart afterwards, he could not resist urging another plea.

"Time," he began; "you must let me hope in what time can do; you will come to think more kindly of me by-and-by. I will not give up all hope just yet."

"But you had better," said Emmie, gently. "If you did persuade me to give you a different answer from that which I have given you to-day, that would not make it right; I should give it more or less from the reasons I told you of, and it would not be well for you in the end. When someone you have come to love, tells you she loves you with all her heart, you will be glad that I spoke the truth to you to-day."

"Why should I change more than you? You would marry that other one, even though he does not love you as I do!"

"No, I would not," said Emmie, with a little glow rising in her cheek; "I would not let him do for me what I will not do for you. And you must not think or speak about that again, please."

The momentary sting of anger gave her courage to draw away her hand and turn to the door. Dr. Urquhart followed, full of penitence and shame for having brought that flush of pain to her cheek.

“Forgive me ! it is so hard to part when we have lived near each other so long, and when you have been all the world to me. Oh ! Miss West, surely the other is a passing fancy, you called it a fancy yourself ; surely you can look back to a time when you thought more—kindly of me ? ”

Emmie stood for a minute with her hand on the door, and looked back into the bright Land of Beulah, where she had spent so many happy hours, and which, in its comfort and homeliness, was such a contrast to the desolate rest of the house to-night. To leave it was like turning away from a haven of security to battle with storms outside, but she was too truthful and single-minded to deceive herself. It was *not* of Dr. Urquhart she had been used to think when she came up here in the dusky afternoons last winter, to sit in the fire-glow, and dream her girlish dreams, while Mrs. Urquhart nodded in her arm-chair. It was not his face that looked out of the dark corners in the guise of some romance hero whose fortunes she thought herself following ; not his voice that said all the fine or tender things ; she might be ever so much ashamed, now she knew whose likeness it was that had given reality to every pleasant tale ; but she could not deceive herself into believing that it was someone else's, or set up a

new image for worship because it was convenient to do so.

“I have always thought kindly of you, but not in the way you mean. No, not once,” she added, with an emphatic, sorrowful shake of the head, that shattered Dr. Urquhart’s confidence, and froze his hopes more than all her previous words had done. It was all over then; he saw the door open and shut behind her, without attempting another word. And when Mrs. Urquhart came back a few minutes later, smiling and confident, though a little surprised that the interview had lasted so short a time, she found him seated at his writing-table with his face buried in his hands, and had no need to ask any questions.

It was a great blow, all the greater because it was the first failure in his successful, hard-working life, yet the first bitter hour had hardly passed before the wholesomeness of the maxim on which Emmie had acted, began to be verified in him. Truth does not rankle if it is accepted bravely, and he soon began to be thankful that it was a bitter truth he had to take into his life, and not a fair deception. Emmie had judged him rightly; it was the reality of love he wanted, not its pale counterfeit, heart-understanding and comradeship, if any at all, to bear him through an anxious life. Even before he

had brought himself to repeat one or two of her bitter truths to his mother, Emmie's prophecy had a dawning of fulfilment, and he acknowledged to himself that if things were so, she had done well by him to be so pitilessly truthful.

CHAPTER IX.

DISCORDS.

In Love, if Love be Love, if love be ours,
Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers.
Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.

It is the little rift within the lute,
That, by-and-by, will make the music mute,
And, ever widening, slowly silence all.

“THIS great Babylon that I have builded;” these words rushed into Alma’s mind, as she stood by her mother on the terrace overlooking the gardens at Leigh, on the day after their arrival, and noticed the smile of perfect satisfaction on Lady Rivers’s face. Lord Anstice had brought out his guests after dinner to look at the sunset from the terrace facing westward, where visitors were customarily taken on summer evenings, to enjoy the wide expanse of view, and the glow on the distant hills. Lady Rivers could not by any means keep her eyes so far afield, however, it was the near prospect that interested her. The garden-terraces, one below the other, ablaze with autumn flowers, the fountains sending

up showers of jewels in the evening light, the glimpses of park, and groups of antlered deer, beyond the gardens, the two stately avenues of oaks that might be traced to the entrance-gates, a mile or two away in opposite directions; the massive white house behind, from which they had just come. "Not perhaps so showy, and complete in every detail as Golden Mount, but oh! what a different air it has, *how* preferable!" The remark was whispered to Alma when Wynyard turned aside to take a letter the servant brought him, but Lady Rivers's whispers were rather in the stage fashion, and Alma felt sure that he caught the words "Golden Mount" at least; it was the second time to-day that Lady Rivers had brought out that unfortunate comparison in his presence. The first time he had laughed good-humouredly, and glanced openly at Alma, as if expecting her to share his amusement, but now his face grew grave, and he walked off to the other end of the terrace, with his letter in his hand, to look at the sunset by himself. Did he, Alma wondered, go away out of consideration for her, to give Lady Rivers time to exhale all her raptures over the scene, at a safe distance from his ears, and so spare her confusion, or was he really disgusted? Was he busy just now, as Alma often suspected him to be, in reasoning or scolding himself

back into toleration? She had fallen into a way of watching him whenever they were together, and speculating about his thoughts, and this did not conduce to ease on either side, or to the confidence that surely ought to have been established now that they were within a month of the wedding-day.

So many unfortunate allusions to the time of the Kirkman intimacy were always dropping either from Lady Rivers, or from Sir Francis's tactless lips, that Alma could not keep her thoughts from working round them, and sometimes she never lifted her eyes to her lover's face for a whole day, but to look for a change in it, to wonder when the dawn of the first suspicion would show itself there. If she could but have been her real self to him, if only she had not had "the little grain of conscience" to make her sour, all might have been well. Only that very day she had vexed and disappointed him twice,—the day that she had meant to be such a triumphant, white day,—on which he had brought such warmth of welcome to their meeting. She had surprised him disagreeably at the moment of being taken by him to the morning-room, hereafter to be her own, by refusing sharply to sit down and write the first note ever written at her new writing-table, to Madame de Florimel, to invite her to come to the wedding. An hour before

dinner she had vexed him again, by drawing back when he wanted to introduce her to an old London friend of his, a watchmaker, who was spending a little time at Leigh, and was at that moment enjoying a hunt for butterflies in the kitchen-garden. "Why could she not have humoured him?" she asked herself now. He had so evidently wanted to get her to himself, away from her mother's raptures which had been wearying enough all day; why could she not have pleased him, by being civil to the old man? There was nothing against it, but the vague suspicion that haunted her about everything or person connected with her own or Wynyard's life during the last few months, lest it or he should prove a snare beneath her feet, or a witness confronting her with some question that would bring her to shame. Now he had carried away the odious belief that she was vulgar enough to be ashamed of the time of his poverty, and jealous of the friends he had made then,—that was the interpretation he would put upon her unwillingness to talk about the events of the last year; he would explain the cloud that must always hang over that passage of their mutual lives so, and she could never justify herself, though she knew the extent to which it would lower her in his estimation.

By-and-by, Wynyard having finished reading his

note, came back to them, and they walked up and down the terrace together, whilst he pointed out the chief features of the prospect to Lady Rivers. The mausoleum in the far distance, among the tallest and oldest yew-trees in the county; the ugly squat obelisk erected by some crazy Lord Anstice of a few generations back, in memory of a favourite hunter; "My Lady's Folly," whose cost had laid the last straw on the load of debt that had overwhelmed Madame de Florimel's branch of the family.

"Alma could have her folly if she liked," Lady Rivers smilingly supposed, without any danger now of involving the family estates; the late Lord Anstice's hoards would be proof against any number of follies."

"Well, I am glad you like it all," Wynyard observed, when there was a breathing space in Lady Rivers's praises. "I can't say so much myself. I have always thought the place rather ugly than otherwise, and wish that my uncle had left the old house standing. However, we shall see what the future will do. 'Times change by the rood,' don't they, Alma? Now that Sir Gilbert du Bois 'has lots of food and firewood,' his desolate tower may hope to get a new character. How can it help that," he added, in a lower tone, for he caught a look of vexation on Alma's face, "when the maiden 'with wonderful eyes, too, under her hood' comes into it at last?"

They had reached a side entrance, and Lady Rivers proposed to go in, but Wynyard drew Alma back, as she was following, and pleaded for another turn or two, "unless she was tired, or," he added quickly, "unless she had had enough of his company for one day."

Alma silently slipped her hand under his arm, but did not look up till quite a minute after, and then her eyes were full of tears. Wynyard led her to a seat under the shelter of a protecting buttress.

"Now you are going to tell me what is the matter," he said. "There has been a shadow between us all day; and, Alma, don't you think it is time for us to get out of our company armour, offensive and defensive, and be ourselves to each other? We can't live in it, can we? Yet, dearest, though I have watched and watched, ready, I think, to help you out, if you would give the least sign, I don't believe you have shown me your true self since that one hour by the river on our journey, which I thought was to begin so much happiness, such perfect trust. How is it? I don't think it is my fault; but if you think it is, just tell me."

"You should not speak as you did just now. You should not have said that about Sir Gilbert du Bois to mamma and me. Wynyard, don't you think I know you well enough to read your secret thoughts when you say

things of that sort about sudden changes of fortune, however smilingly you may say them? It is not all play, or at all events it is a play that hurts me."

"Then I am sorry; you shall not have to complain again. But, Alma dear, why are you so sensitive? In a few days more, remember, we shall be one, not two, and the past will be a common possession. Surely our relations are sound enough for us to permit ourselves our little jokes and allusions to bygone troubles that have been utterly blown away? You cannot think I seriously suspect you of having changed with my fortune? Should we be sitting here if I did? Have I not your own word, given me on that last day of my old life, that you loved me and were faithful to me, through all the time when others tried to divide us? If a drop of gall sometimes oozes into my talk, it ought not to touch *you*. Look me in the face, dear, and let me see that it never will again; show me that you have put yourself too entirely on my side, to be hurt personally by what I say in jest or earnest about that old cause of bitterness. Nay," he added, when Alma did not look up, "I am not asking for any new assurances of love, though perhaps I think I get rather less of these than I might look for, considering my long fast, and what is coming next month. But I won't be exacting. I am satisfied with those few words

by the river. Only look me once more in the face, dear Alma, and before it is too dark to see, let me read in your eyes—the dear eyes that had such frank kindness in them for me once—that there is not really any doubt between us, not so much as that you shall ever again fancy that I doubt you.”

Alma heard a quick, impatient sigh, while she was debating within herself whether or not she dare look up, and reveal all the trouble there must be in her face. Before she had made up her mind, Wynyard ended the suspense by jumping up from his seat, as if he could bear her hesitation no longer.

“You will tell me at your own time,” he said, gravely; “or, perhaps,” hesitating as if waiting to be contradicted, “it will be better to make up our minds to let the past be past. I will cure myself of making bitter allusions—there, it is a promise—and you—but, no, I will make no conditions. I will wait for the old dear openness and confidence to come back as they must, a thousandfold dearer for the new ties. One does not get any good by tearing one’s rosebuds open. Let us walk to the end of the terrace, the sun is all but gone down, and the one time when this view is worth anything is while the outlines of those distant, low hills show clear against the after-glow in the west. Poor Ralph made a sketch of the sunset

here, which was one of the best things he ever did ; I'll show it you when we go in."

While they stood watching the changes in the sky, Wynyard talked pleasantly enough about the best situation for Alma's easel to stand in when it arrived, her choice of a music-room, her wishes and pleasure on this or that little household matter. It sounded quite natural talk between an engaged pair, a month before the wedding-day, and would have satisfied Lady Rivers ; but Alma knew Wynyard too well not to detect the slight frost of manner, so unlike his usual attitude towards those he loved, and which she felt put her further away than another person's sullen silence would have done.

When they re-entered the house, Wynyard said, doubtfully :

"There is another visit I wanted you to make to-day, but it is a painful one ; you will be too tired, it had better wait till to-morrow."

"Tell me about it now. Is it to someone in this house?"

"To Mrs. Anstice, poor Ralph's mother. I want you to see her, and if you can find an opportunity, say something to her about its being your wish as well as mine, that this house should remain virtually her own, as long as she wants it."

“She is to live here, then?”

“Where else? She has no other home, and as poor Ralph always liked her to be here, she clings to the place as a link with him; she must not be disturbed.”

“Don’t let mamma hear anything about it, then.”

“Why not?”

“She does not believe in two women being able to live in one house.”

“Well, it will not be for long. The house was hers a little while ago, and would no doubt be hers still, if Ralph had made a will. It is not in the entail, and could have been given absolutely to her, as my uncle once meant to give it to me.”

“But I thought she was a very disagreeable woman, with whom no one could get on.”

“She is very ill and broken-hearted now. Don’t go to see her to-night, however, unless you wish it. She expects you, but you can do as you like.”

“Of course I will go,” said Alma, hurt at the tone the conversation had taken. “I was not making objections on my own account.”

And then she followed silently, while Wynyard led the way, up a staircase and along several galleries hung with pictures, to the distant wing of the house, where the apartments occupied by Mrs. Anstice since her son’s

death, were situated. He was thinking all the time of that evening when Ralph had surprised him in his chambers, and talked of Alma. How angry he had been at his cousin's proposal to resign the house and estate and his mother to the joint management of himself and Alma, while he travelled. And now here they were, undertaking the task, all exactly as Ralph had planned it (he himself, poor fellow, banished); but, under what different circumstances, in what a different frame of mind, too, from anything he (Wynyard) could have imagined at the time. As he looked back to his feelings on that evening, he could hardly believe he had been on the point of saying to Alma a minute ago, that if she objected to living in the same house with Mrs. Anstice, the wedding could be put off till after Mrs. Anstice's death, and that he had only restrained himself from a fear of giving the first vent to a crowd of secret discontents which he had resolved not to allow to come to the front, but to smother for the sake of future peace.

Alma broke the silence when he paused to lift the heavy curtain which shut off the passage leading to the sick-room from the rest of the house.

"Has Mrs. Anstice no relation or friend of her own with her? She must feel very solitary in this big house when you are away."

“She has a friend with her to-day ; and, by-the-way, a young lady you must know something of. You have often, I suppose, met the two sisters who lived in your aunt’s house in Saville Street, Katherine and Christabel Moore ?”

“Are they here ?” exclaimed Alma, in a tone which certainly did not betray much pleasure. “What can they have to do with Mrs. Anstice !”

“Not much, perhaps, but they were spending a few weeks at Abbot’s Leigh in the spring, and Mrs. Anstice met one of the sisters in the park near the mausoleum. They got into talk somehow. I think Mrs. Anstice turned faint and Miss Moore helped her back into her bath-chair. Since then, my aunt has shown more pleasure in their society than in anything else.”

“Do *they* live here, too, in the house ?”

“Oh no ! They left Abbot’s Leigh two months or more ago, and are now lodging with my old watch-making friend, David Macvie, at Barnsby. It seems that old Macvie bought a business at Barnsby a little while since, and these two sisters followed in his wake I suppose ; there was always some curious sort of link between them.”

“It gives one an eerie kind of feeling to hear of so many former acquaintances turning up in our new home.”

“ Katherine Moore is an acquaintance worth keeping, at any rate. She has been spending a few days with Mrs. Anstice, but goes back with David to-night.”

The windows of the room they entered were already closed and curtained, but there was a shaded lamp on a table by a sofa, on which the invalid lay. Its rays showed Alma a pale, haggard face turned towards the door to greet her. Wynyard took her up to the sofa, and her hands were laid hold of, by two thin feverish hands, and, almost before she was aware the sick lady had drawn her down, and kissed her on the forehead. Wynyard pushed a chair forward within the circle of the lamp-light, and Alma sat down, uncomfortably conscious of two large hungry eyes exploring her face as though to find out if there was any promise of help there, for a wounded soul. Alma wished the ordeal over, and yet when Mrs. Anstice turned away from her at last, and when she saw how the hollow eyes softened as they rested upon Wynyard's face, she had a curious sense of having been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

While Mrs. Anstice talked to Wynyard, Alma had leisure to notice the other occupants of the room. A young lady in black sat working at the end of the sofa. She looked up and answered when Wynyard addressed her, but kept in the background till the conversation was

interrupted by a violent fit of coughing on Mrs. Anstice's part; then she came forward to raise the sufferer's pillows, and, when the paroxysm was over, remained supporting her, stroking back the hair with skilful fingers, whose touch seemed to have a mesmeric power of soothing. That then was Katherine Moore, whose name used to come so often into Emmie West's talk, and against whom Alma had felt in old times just enough antagonism, to make her reappearance in this new sphere a disagreeable *contretemps*. As the frown of suffering passed from Mrs. Anstice's face, a gentler expression stole over it, and a glance of gratitude transfigured her sad eyes into momentary beauty.

"See," she said, turning to Wynyard as soon as she could speak, "Miss Christabel Moore has sent me another little picture to-day. I like it better than any of the others I have had from her, though they all comfort me. You may take it into your hand, and look at it, if you like."

The picture referred to, rested against a small frame upon the table, and when Wynyard had examined it he passed it on to Alma. She had noticed it before, as it stood in the full lamplight, and had wondered at its beauty, thinking that the delicate colouring and the radiant glory on the central figure reminded her of some

of Blake's drawings. A closer inspection confirmed the impression. The picture was contained within a circle not larger than might have served for an initial letter ; but, small as it was, there was a wonderful amount of delicate work in it, curves melting into curves and exquisite colour into colour. The lower part of the picture expressed vaguely, dark, rolling water just touched by a light that, further off, grew brighter, illuminating the shore, upon which there stood a slender, youthful figure, with upturned face and outstretched hands, holding a cross, and raising it towards a yet stronger light overhead. The whole atmosphere of the picture was full of light and peace and hope, and yet, in the wonder of the face, and in the very air of new-born strength shown in the poise of the figure, whose feet just touched the shore, there was a suggestion of past trouble and difficulty ; something that spoke of a dark, long night that had preceded the glad day, of a faint or indifferent heart surprised and touched by an unexpected and undeserved welcome to the shores of light.

Wynyard came to look over Alma's shoulder before she had finished with the picture, and pointed out the beauty and completeness of the work. He told her that Mrs. Anstice had several other drawings of the same kind, all done by Miss Moore's sister, now too great an

invalid to leave her room, and when Mrs. Anstice held out her hand as if impatient to restore the treasure to its place, he asked permission to show the other pictures to Miss Rivers. When leave was granted, Katherine brought a portfolio and stood opposite Alma and Wynyard, showing the drawings, but guarding them, so Alma fancied, a little jealously against too close an inspection, and never allowing them to pass out of her own hands. They were all of the same mystical character, but varied in detail. Here the whole picture seemed to grow and expand out of a small decaying seed; stalks, leaves, and flowers which, unclosing, disclosed angel faces and branched upwards towards infinite light. Here a crowd of seraph faces bent over a rose, from one of whose leaves depended an empty chrysalis, and on whose heart two caterpillars were feeding. Here again was the shore of light with the wide sea, but in this, there was no figure visible on the further verge; a golden mist brooded over it, and on the near bank were two persons bending down to loosen the fastenings that held a boat to the strand. In another, a woman, with a face full of yearning and hope, held a casket in her arms, outstretched towards heaven. A message or a parable was contained in each picture. Alma, who was less occupied than Wynyard with the beauty of the drawings, stole,

every now and then, a questioning look at Katherine Moore, to see if there was anything in her countenance or manner when she answered Wynyard's questions as to the meaning of the designs, that would throw light on the mystery of their composition, or on the reason of their being sent to Mrs. Anstice. What interest had these sisters in her, to induce them to give so much time and thought to her consolation?

“Katherine tells me the drawings are given to her sister for me,” Mrs. Anstice was now remarking to Wynyard; “and though I am always glad of a new one, I think the old ones get dearer to me every day, and that a fresh hope steals into my heart each time I look at them—hopes that I should not dare to listen to, if they were put into words. These pictures are better than words, they never startle and they never hurry me, but they creep into my heart and comfort me, I don't know how. You will tell your sister this, won't you?” she added, looking at Katherine. “I don't know why she takes so much trouble for me, or how she knows exactly what I want; but I can't think what I should do without her and you, especially now that Wynyard is going away, and I shall have no one else near me, I care to see.”

Alma looked at Katherine while Mrs. Anstice spoke.

Yes, indeed, what was the link between them, how came the sisters to understand her grief better than anyone else?

Katherine, happening to turn round suddenly, met the questioning gaze with another as full of meaning, a long steadfast look, which had more in it than a steady putting down of Alma's curiosity. There was that in the look, but there was something else too, and all through the rest of the evening, when she and Wynyard had rejoined Lady Rivers in the drawing-room, Alma questioned with herself what that something was.

Could Katherine Moore feel compassion for *her*, Alma Rivers, on the day when she had seen for the first time the stately house she was soon to enter as its mistress? If it was not pity that softened those clear, judging eyes while they dwelt on her face, what was the meaning of their changed expression? The look haunted Alma like a prophecy, or a warning of coming disappointment.

It was late when Katherine got back to the watch-maker's shop at Barnsby, where she and Christabel had lived for three months. Christabel was still waiting up for her in their little room, and though she looked white and exhausted, Katherine humoured her by sitting at

her side and allowing herself to be minutely cross-questioned on every particular of the visit to Leigh.

It was now two months since Christabel herself had been at Leigh, and Katherine knew she was not likely to be able to go there again, while Mrs. Anstice lived. The intercourse, accidentally begun, on which Christabel set such store could only be kept up by means of the little pictures which Katherine had, after much entreaty, consented to convey to Leigh from time to time.

“So they came in and you saw them together; were you satisfied?” Christabel asked, after a longer interval of silence than had occurred yet.

Katherine took some time to consider her answer.

“I think she loves him for himself, and that she is perhaps strong enough to bear a great downfall of her ambition bravely, if it comes; but she is ambitious and worldly, and as to being satisfied—I cannot be that while you are silent; you know what I would have had you do long since.”

“Dearest, we will not discuss that matter; you said you would not ask me again. I promised him that he should tell his mother himself, and you know that their meeting will be soon: it can only be delayed a few weeks longer you think, and there will still be time for

him to win her forgiveness, and reconcile her to me, as he always said he would, before I come. I was not to see her while she was angry with him, or me, and I shall not."

"For my sake, Christabel, do not talk so. You have no right to take *that* for granted. It may be natural under all the circumstances, but it is not right; and remember, as your nurse, as well as your sister, I forbid you to talk of it."

"I can obey that order," said Christabel, smiling and stroking Katherine's face. "I won't talk, dear, after to-night. I know it is cruel to you. I have been very cruel to you this last year of my life. I see it clearly now, and that is one of my punishments. I have just taken your life—the grand, beautiful life you had planned to make yours—and I have crushed it out with my own, in snatching at a happiness to which I had no right, which I ought at all events to have waited patiently for. I have been cruel, like all selfish people, and I can only ask you now, as I do in my heart every moment of the day, to forgive me."

"Nay, you are only cruel when you talk of leaving me."

"I must, whenever you raise that question. It is only when you know what I really look forward to, that

you can help blaming me. I want you to let me keep my promise to him till I see him again, since it will be so soon, and the silence for that time can only hurt our two selves."

"If I could be sure of that! But how do you know that you are not depriving Mrs. Anstice of a great comfort by not letting her know what has been, and what may be?"

"Katherine, you don't really think that? I had only to talk to her for a few minutes, and look in her face, to understand his fear of telling her. It would have been hard for her to hear it, if all had been well; but now—to learn from strangers that he died with such a secret between him and herself, would kindle in her a fire of jealousy that even the chills of death could hardly quench. No, as he always said, he must tell her himself. She has a stern nature, and the life she led with him was full of storms. Yet there was strong love on both sides, and when they meet, perhaps they will be permitted only to remember the love."

"But why do you send her those pictures, if you do not want her to know anything?"

"I am planting a little seed that will bloom out there. She will go with a hidden hope in her heart, and when she looks at it with purged eyes, she will understand,

and will be ready for me and for it, if I take it with me."

"Again, dear, you must not say such things."

"I don't want to leave you desolate, Kitty; I have my hope for you too, and this once I will speak of it. I should like something to be paid back into your life, to make up, I don't say for the miss of me, but for the sacrifices these last months have cost you. We are not so poor now, that a new charge would be a burden to you. Uncle Christopher's legacy has saved us from anxieties of that nature for the future, and I should like you to have some one to train up in your own views, who would repay you better than I have done. If my child is a girl, all will be comparatively easy. No one need ever know the whole history but Lord Anstice; he will make it all right for her, and you can take her away to Zürich and live with your friends there, and make her what you would have been but for me. I know it won't annul the hardship to you, darling. I have broken your heart nearly, and spoilt your life, but at least I see where I was wrong, and have repented and been forgiven. These are precious months of waiting and learning we are having together, and, dearest, I think your life will be the richer and stronger for them. You will carry out some of our old dreams still, with a new spirit put into

the old aspirations ; and you will think sometimes, won't you, when you are working for others, that you have a double life's work laid upon you—mine, that I threw away, as well as your own."

Katherine was stroking Christabel's thin hand as she talked, and instead of answering, she held the almost transparent fingers to the light. "They are very thin," she said, sadly ; "too thin—and yet they look as if they had a good deal of work left in them yet. They never did such beautiful things before, as they do now, and I can't believe that this wonderful new power has come to them, to cease in a few months. No, dear ; you, too, have a life of activity for others, before you."

"Here or there ?" said Christabel softly.

"You must not wish."

"I don't wish. On the contrary, when I am dreaming, a great sorrow and a great yearning come over me. I feel the half-developed power in me, and I see visions of beautiful art-work that would have been given to me to do, if I had been faithful to my calling, and not snatched at a personal happiness I could not reach, without treading down other people's good. Then I find it hard to hush my spirit and refrain from longing for the opportunities given back. I don't turn away from life if it is given, -I only acknowledge the monition I have

within myself, that I have forfeited it, and that I shall not have the chance now, of doing here what I was meant to do."

"Of course I know there is no use arguing against presentiments, but I must be true to my knowledge and remind you that they are not uncommon in your circumstances, or much to be regarded. There is an alternative which I think you don't look at enough, and which I must bring forward once more, to urge you to speak or to let me speak, to Lord Anstice before it is quite too late. I heard this afternoon that an early day next month is fixed for Lord Anstice's wedding. Suppose some morning, three months hence, he suddenly hears that an heir is born to his cousin, in whose favour title and estates will have to be given up, what a mockery the grand wedding for which the Riverses are preparing, will then seem to every one!"

"Nay, surely not. What will it signify to two people, happy in each other, whether they had a grand or a simple wedding? Did not Lord Anstice tell you that he and Miss Rivers were engaged on their journey home from La Roquette before they knew anything about his change of fortune? They meant to have each other all the time, it seems, and this flash of prosperity, if it should turn out to be only temporary, will seem to them

to have come in good time to bring them together without opposition."

"You hardly estimate what the disappointment must be to people who know more of the world than you do, dearest."

"Ah, but I do. It is you who underestimate what a help it will be to them, under the disappointment, to have had that chief matter of their lives put beyond question, before the reverse came. It would be all that less to think of; and if she is worth anything at all, she would hardly have a thought to spare from thankfulness that she had the right to comfort him."

"I wish I had not felt such a strong impulse to warn Miss Rivers this evening when I saw her. I observed her from the window in Mrs. Anstice's room when she came out after dinner with Lord Anstice, and afterwards while she was turning over the leaves in your portfolio, I took a long look at her face, and the result was that I had a longing to warn them both."

"I wish I could recall her face quite clearly," Christabel said. "I have been trying all day to bring it back to my memory. Emmie West once showed me her photograph, and occasionally I had a peep in Saville Street. Surely we used to like her face, there was something fine about it."

“Yes, and something weak as well. The weakness that is fostered by living among people who have few enthusiasms ; the weakness of lacking the single eye—a want that leaves the whole body full of darkness, when a choice between outward and inward good has to be made. I think the weakness has grown, too, and that there is a shadow on the face which used not to be there.”

“But she loves him ; it is a true mutual love.”

“Since the engagement preceded this change of fortune, I suppose we ought not to doubt that. I told you that I had had the courage to put a leading question to Lord Anstice, and that he seemed glad to let me know how it had been. He is not changed by his changed fortunes ; he was just as anxious to bespeak our good opinion and friendship for his wife, as if he had been going to take her to those rooms over the printing-office he once described to us, instead of to Leigh. I don’t know any-one who stands outside his circumstances as he does.”

“Then he is ready for whatever happens. And as for Alma Rivers, if her spirit is clouded, what can we wish for her better than trouble, to bring her to her better self ? I do recollect her face now, and I am sure there is good enough in it to give us ground for believing that she will rise to meet the disappointment bravely if it comes ; and,

remember, there are at least two alternatives against its coming."

"Well, dearest, my concern is chiefly with you, and I know we cannot afford to waste your strength in avoidable agitation. I have made my last remonstrance, and shall now keep to our bargain, that if you will obey me inside this house, I will leave your relations with the outside world alone for the present. Now I am going to put you to bed, and read you to sleep with a bundle of letters from Saville Street that came this morning."

"Do the Wests write from Saville Street still?"

"Yes, but it was their last day. The furniture from 'Air Throne' had been sent to their cottage in Kent, and Mildie writes to us from the empty room, perched on the window-sill, with her writing-desk on her knees—a melancholy tirade, as you shall hear."

"Poor Dr. Urquhart! That was a mistaken prophecy of yours, Katherine. You gave Emmie's heart away very easily when we talked about it at first. I remember you expected to see it flower into love under Dr. Urquhart's courting as surely as the hyacinth roots into bloom, when you had put them in the sun."

"My hyacinths never produced anything but leaves, if you remember, last spring, so my comparison held good, if my prophecy did not. Poor little Emmie!"

“What an inconsistent sigh from you, Dr. Katherine Moore that is to be!”

“Not at all! I have my suspicions about Emmie’s reasons for refusing Dr. Urquhart; and even if they were nothing else, I am sure I am right to sigh at the prospect of another incompetent teacher being thrust upon the world, to wear herself away with uncongenial work. I wish we could do anything beyond sending that fifty pounds as additional rent for our two years’ tenancy of ‘Air Throne,’ which Mrs. West will not, I think, refuse, now she knows we can so well spare it.”

“It is my fault that we must shut ourselves away from all our friends till the end of the year, in this out-of-the-way place, where nobody knows us. But never mind, dear Katherine, good sense and gentleness count for something, and Emmie won’t do any harm to her pupils for a few months, even without a certificate. After that time your hands will be free, and you can do what you like for her; have her to live with you, and fit her for congenial work of some sort, since she seems to have a heart of the inconvenient kind that refuses to give itself away, as self-interest dictates.”

CHAPTER X.

ATÊ.

Zêu, Zeû, Κάτωθεν ἀμπεμπων υστέρόποινον ἄταν.

THE summer had been a very hot one, but September had set in damp and gusty, and the sudden change of temperature brought an increase in Mrs. Anstice's ailments, which cast a degree of gloom over the latter part of the Rivers's visit to Leigh. Lady Rivers naturally resented any hint of alarm respecting the symptoms of an illness resembling her own, and was alternately disposed to fret over the prospect of Alma's being saddled with a permanent invalid in her married home, and to grow agitated under a sudden dread that something immediate might happen to postpone the wedding. To be sure it would only entail a delay of a few weeks, for what was this poor Mrs. Anstice to any of them; but even a short delay would cause grave inconvenience,

and would give the Kirkmans a handle to talk. It made Lady Rivers's hair stand on end, even to think of the triumph that would fill Mrs. Kirkman's heart, if the smallest excuse were given her for saying that the fine fish for which Miss Rivers had angled so shamelessly, had escaped from her net just as it was landed. "And you know, Alma, she is quite capable of saying that, or something still more vulgar, if she could think of it, and she is cleverer than I am, your father says; but then he thinks anybody cleverer than I am." Sir Francis Rivers came to Leigh for the last week of the visit, and his presence diverted from Alma the hearing of some of her mother's complaints and forebodings. On the other hand he brought fresh elements of discomfort into the atmosphere—allusions to his sons' idleness, to the needs of the West boys, and fresh schemes for pushing their fortunes through Mr. Kirkman, which made Alma wince and blush. Nearly as bad were his floods of professional talk, into which Wynyard was guilty of plunging, with a relish that suggested the amount of *ennui* inflicted on him, by Lady Rivers's previous efforts to keep the conversation during meals at the level she considered due to the coronet on the plate and the footmen's liveries. "Encouraging your father in his very worst faults," Lady Rivers moaned, when she and her daughter were

alone, "even to the enormity of bringing dusty law-books into the drawing-room and looking out quotations with your father for his dreadful book, under my very eyes, while the butler was handing round the tea. The sort of thing I have been fighting against all my life. When I first thought of having an earl for my son-in-law, I little expected he'd take that side, and weaken my hands with your father to this extent. There might have been a want of refinement at Golden Mount; but it would not have been of a kind so fatal to all domestic discipline, the men-servants' feelings were respected there, at least. I wonder you can bear it, Alma!"

Yet in spite of these and some other drawbacks, there were portions of that week to which Alma always looked back with tender yearning; golden half-hours, during which the peace, and joy, and sunshine of love entered her heart with half promises of always staying there. Evening and morning and mid-day strolls with Wynyard on the terrace; slow rides in quiet lanes between the autumnal hedgerows; exhilarating canters across the stubble of the lately cleared harvest-fields; times when the present was full enough to crowd out all remembrance of the past, and fears for the future; when, by the help of some country sight or sound, she found herself lifted over recent memories and landed in recol-

lections of earlier days which, without any remorse, she could share with Wynyard. True, a very little thing, a chance word, a sudden question, a name cropping up in the conversation might put an end to all this satisfaction in a minute, and suddenly reopen to Alma's perception the dividing gulf between herself and her lover.

When Alma was next alone after such a happy hour with such an abrupt awakening, she usually comforted herself by making resolutions of perfect frankness towards her husband at some future time. Some day, in this very place (and before the visit was over, Alma had in thought made half-a-dozen lovely spots out of doors and cosy nooks in the house, the scene of the confidence)—some day—when use had given an added sweetness to all the details of life, when they were returning from a walk on some spring evening next year, or after a conversation, perhaps, over an old favourite book by their winter fire-side, when some unusual emotion of tenderness had been called out—she would take courage and tell him the whole story. She would begin, “You know me now, and you know how I love you, you cannot doubt the love of your own wife,—well, now I will tell you the truth about myself, how I felt and what I did a year ago ; and because you are my husband, and better and stronger than I am, you must help me to bear the flaws in my

conscience that make me feel unworthy of you. I am not unworldly as you are, it was not altogether disinterested love that made me marry you. I do care very much to see you here, and perhaps even love you better in a position that I think becomes you, than I could ever have done if you had remained in obscurity. It is not high-minded to feel like this ; but it belongs to me, and as we are one now, you have got to bear with it." Then she thought she would begin and tell him straight out the history of Madelon's wedding-day, and how she had hidden the letter in the drawer of cut corks in the little south room at La Roquette. It would be a great blow to him. She pictured to herself the changes on his face while he listened. At first he would hardly believe she had done it ; would put a question or two eagerly, half hoping to find some excuse, some explanation that she had forgotten to give ; but when it was all over, he would not turn away from her, he would take it as a misfortune that concerned them both. He would comfort her, and perhaps even admire her for the courage that had led her to reveal the truth at last.

Alma imagined that after such confession her conscience would be healed, and she would feel at liberty to take his love as really belonging to her in a way she could not do now. This was the plan she made in her

happiest moments, but she could not always see it possible, even when she and Wynyard most nearly resumed the old footing of dear and unclouded intimacy. There were occasions when a word or look of his would awaken quite an opposite mood, and she found herself near to registering a vow never to let him have the least hint of a deed, that would sink her to a depth of contempt she had not imagined to be in him. Sometimes a terror seized her, whether it was that *one* deception only, which had erected the barrier she found it so hard to pass. Had she been sinking lower, growing smaller, more sordid in her views and aims, while he had been rising higher? Had his life, as Agatha's had, grown so far apart from hers, that "they could not hear each other speak," in however close companionship their days and years were passed?

The hopeful mood was uppermost in Alma's mind on the morning of her departure from Leigh. She and Wynyard had had an early ride, when the fresh touch of autumn in the air, and the dewy beauty of the woods and fields had exhilarated them to a pitch of almost boyish and girlish joyousness. After breakfast, while Wynyard took leave of Mrs. Anstice, she and her father made a final tour of the gardens together, and Alma thoroughly enjoyed his sensible appreciation of the beauty and

grandeur she displayed to him, with a sense of proprietorship stealing into her heart. There was nothing in her father's way of speaking to offend her taste. His was the kind of satisfaction that her judgment approved as a fitting homage to the good things of the world. She felt almost restored to self-complacency as she listened, and a word or two dropped by Sir Francis about Wynyard's worth and his probable weight in the country in the coming years, made her heart beat quickly, and her cheeks glow, while she whispered to herself that at last she was happy,—as happy as she had ever expected to be. Wynyard met them on the terrace, and Sir Francis left the lovers alone to take a last look at the sunny gardens, and exchange happy auguries for the future.

“It will not be precisely this picture that we shall see when we come back,” said Alma, as they turned away from the sparkling fountains and the blaze of autumn flowers, and began to walk towards the house. “The richness and the glory will have mellowed, and the year entered upon another stage before we stand here together again.”

“That may be sooner than we have been expecting, dear,” answered Wynyard, “for I have just promised Mrs. Anstice that nothing shall prevent my seeing her

once more. I could not refuse her the comfort of such an assurance, could I, Alma? And you will not grudge the sacrifice, if we have to make it, of shortening the time of our absence, for her sake. I have said that we will hold ourselves in readiness. Katherine Moore has undertaken to write if any change for the worse should take place whilst we are away."

This was the one jarring note to Alma in the perfect harmony of that happy morning.

She had consented reluctantly that Wynyard should consider himself bound to Mrs. Anstice's service for the few months longer she was likely to live; but it vexed her to be reminded, just in this hour, that he had a duty unconnected with herself, to which their plans must give way. The vexation she felt upon this account recalled another disturbing thought to her mind.

"Katherine Moore," she repeated, thoughtfully, "you seem to take it for granted that she will go on coming about the place. Has Mrs. Anstice engaged her as companion or nurse? Is there any reason of that kind for all the trouble Miss Moore takes for Mrs. Anstice?"

"I should think not; Miss Moore has had some money left her lately by an uncle who died in Australia. So, at least, she told me when I ventured to remonstrate

on her allowing Mrs. Anstice to take up so much of her time."

"I wonder she does. It must be very melancholy work. I wonder she spends so much time with Mrs. Anstice, who is no relation to her, if she is not obliged."

"Do you?" Wynyard answered.

They had reached the carriage by this time, and the conversation dropped.

Alma did not notice how silent Wynyard was during the first hour of the journey, or suspect in the least that she had spoiled his happy recollections of that sunny morning as effectually as he had spoiled hers. Lady Rivers made conversation enough, however, to cover other people's deficiencies. A thousand little details of the wedding-day had to be discussed, and now was the time, she observed, to talk them over. Wynyard, on plea of the recent death in his family, and Mrs. Anstice's precarious state of health, had begged hard for a quiet wedding. It was to be very quiet, Lady Rivers explained to him now, only not quite a hole-and-corner wedding.

"It will never do, you know," she urged, "to give people the opportunity of saying that we were ashamed of ourselves, and had the wedding in a corner on that account."

Here, once more, for the very last time, she hoped,

Alma had to give her mother a warning look, to prevent her letting drop a further explanatory word respecting the reason for which the Kirkmans might suppose them to be ashamed; for the thought of her old friend Mrs. Kirkman's wrath was too constantly present to Lady Rivers's mind, not to ooze out, more or less, in her talk when she got excited.

Dread of Mrs. Kirkman's anger was by no means Alma's worst skeleton, but the dimensions it assumed in her mother's imagination had a certain effect on hers, and at the end of the day, when they were nearing London, she felt a foreboding creep over her, with the familiar thick atmosphere. She half expected Horace Kirkman's face to appear at the carriage-window when the train stopped, or to catch a glimpse of the gorgeous Kirkman livery among the carriages that were waiting outside the station. The long train was crowded with less pretentious persons, however, chiefly family parties returning from seaside trips, and some delay occurred in getting the luggage together, and finding the carriage.

Sir Francis went outside to look for it, and while Wynyard searched about for a resting-place for Lady Rivers, Alma stood alone and watched the crowd. Did those women, who were struggling for their boxes in

the throng by the barrier, or frantically hailing cabs, and collecting trains of children, think her an enviable specimen of womankind, she wondered, for being able to stand quietly aside and let things take their course? Could she imagine herself acting such a bustling part in life? Yet were there not, a long way back in her memory, pictures of some such comings home from holiday excursions, when the boys were still quite small and the army of nursemaids by no means equal to the occasion? Was there not some story about Frank having been lost on a return journey from the seaside, left behind at a London terminus, and brought home by a gentleman who had been greatly taken with his handsome face and intelligent way of accounting for himself? It was a story her father had once, in the days when Frank was still a favourite, been fond of telling, till Lady Rivers began to think it reflected on their grandeur, and put her veto upon its ever being mentioned again.

Alma wondered afterwards what made her think of Frank just then, why a vision of him,—a slender bright-faced school-boy, as he looked at the time when papa could still flatter himself about his good disposition, and be eager about his removes and prizes,—should be the last that occupied her mind before she caught

sight of her father coming back on the station platform. One glance at his face chased all thought away, and her heart stood still with fright, so clearly was disaster written upon it. She hurried towards him, for he scarcely seemed able to stand, and his first movement was to grasp her by the shoulder, and lean heavily upon her. His face was white and drawn, and his body bowed, as if under the effect of a deadly blow.

“Oh, papa! what is it?” she cried, when a second or two had passed, while his twitching lips could not form a word. “Tell me, that I may tell mamma.”

Then he rallied and stood upright.

“Yes, yes, your mother—I cannot see her at this moment, you must get her home first. I will follow and tell her when she is a little prepared; but get her home now.”

“What is it?”

“A telegram from India, put into my hands this moment.”

“Is it Melville or Frank?” Alma whispered.

The answer was a deep groan, and a quick shake of the head. Then in a far-off tone, which somehow seemed to come from over the sea, instead of through her father’s pale lips, she heard:

“He is dead! my boy, my poor boy!”

No need again to ask which. Frank, poor Frank, of whom her father had once been so proud, who had disappointed him most cruelly, and always been loved the best, by both father and mother.

“You must take your mother home,” Sir Francis repeated; “there’s the telegram, but don’t show it until you have her safe in the house. I could not drive with you; no, my dear, I could not sit it out. Forgive me for throwing the burden on you, but I will walk with Wynyard, and be at home almost as soon as you are. Ah! Wynyard was the best friend he ever had, and he wanted me not to send him to India. If I had put him into some humbler way of life—if your mother had not urged me so hard—and now, how am I to tell her the miserable end he has brought upon himself!”

The drive home with Lady Rivers, a little anxious, but still more offended at her husband’s sudden desertion, was got through somehow, as the worst moments of life are lived through, we never afterwards quite know how.

Alma knelt by her mother’s chair in the drawing-room, already a little put out of its usual appearance, by incipient preparations for the wedding, and tried, through leading remarks and questions, to prepare her for the shock that must be given sooner or later. It seemed a long, long time, before her father’s knock came, and yet

she had not got the news told when she heard it. Her mother's thoughts would turn to such thoroughly opposite calamities from the one that awaited her—fears that Alma's sick heart loathed to speak about, and yet which she was obliged to discuss and dismiss—that something had occurred between Constance and her husband, a quarrel, a separation—a scandal about young Lawrence; that the late Lord Anstice had suddenly come to life, and reduced Wynyard to a nobody again; that the Kirkmans had said or done something to prevent the wedding. Sir Francis's face as he entered the room did more than anything else to bring the right thought to poor Lady Rivers's mind, the right word to her lips.

“Frank!” Yes, nothing but that would make Sir Francis look so. The name of the firstborn, beloved, and yet a little dreaded (had it not been uttered in blame chiefly, during the last year or two), burst simultaneously from the lips of the bereaved parents as they faced one another. After a few minutes Alma thought it best to steal away, leaving the two who had loved each other dearly once, though worldliness and prosperity had thrust their hearts asunder, to draw together, in the shadow of the first death that had invaded their family.

But terrible as was that night of new sorrow, sad as were the following days, when one short inscrutable

sentence summed up the whole cause of their grief, there was worse to come. "Killed in a duel," on such a date, the telegram stated, and the intelligence seemed bad enough, as if nothing could make it worse. Yet there was worse to be heard, and it fell the more heavily on Sir Francis, because, during the fortnight that elapsed between getting the telegram and the arrival of letters, the gentle process of beautifying the dead had had time to go far enough, to make a rude facing of hard facts additionally bitter. To have restored one's dead to a pedestal in the heart, and dressed him up in lost graces and innocences of youth, and then to have a tale of his dishonour thrust upon one, of base intrigue, ending in what might well be called a deserved punishment at the hand of the friend he had betrayed—what could be more heart-rending? A good deal was kept from Alma and Lady Rivers as unfit for their ears; but they could not escape gathering a general impression of disgrace and misery from the extreme depression into which Sir Francis fell, after additional news came. It was vacation time, and there was no work going on in the courts, or he would probably have roused himself to attend to it, and borne the blow better. To see him so absorbed by grief as to lose interest in all his usual objects, was something quite new to his family, who did not know how to meet

such a crisis. It was well for them all that Wynyard was at hand, willing to let himself be made the recipient of the miserable father's complaints, and with a liking for his friend of early days which made him a sympathising listener. Alma left the task of comforting her father mainly to him, and did not take advantage of times when they might have been together to let him comfort her, as he longed to be able to do. She was somewhat perversely wretched at this juncture, and nursed a sense of loneliness to which the present state of the household tempted her. With her father and mother the great calamity swallowed up all thought of her personal disappointment, and she found herself wondering sometimes whether the postponement of their wedding was anything like as great a vexation to Wynyard as it was to herself. He could talk easily of a few weeks' delay, but to her, a feverish restlessness came with the uncertainty. She was too proud to show that she suffered more than he, when the day that was to have been their crowning day passed by unnoticed; the hours that should have been so joyous slipping by in gloomy solitude. Her mother never talked about the wedding now, and seldom of the Kirkmans. There was no longer any need to fear indiscretion from her. Wynyard had almost ceased to be a future son-in-law, or even an earl, in her estimation. He was just

Frank's friend, the one person who had ever done any good with poor Frank, and she would monopolise him, when he was not with Sir Francis, in a way that was very trying to Alma, so completely did it seem to put her and her claims aside as non-existent.

Alma did not show to advantage in her mother's sick-room, and she felt that she did not. It was not altogether her fault, for Lady Rivers had never made her a companion for anything but society purposes; the idea of taking this brilliant daughter into real service as a nurse, or comforter, would have been almost as unnatural to her, as the thought of putting on her court pearls, to go to bed in. Even a common sorrow could not draw them together at once, or annul in Alma's heart the antagonism which dated from early years, when the falseness and pretension of which Lady Rivers's life was so largely made up, first dawned upon her, and which had coloured her whole manner of being towards her mother.

It did not help her that Lady Rivers was always longing after Emmie West, and would entertain Wynyard with histories of Emmie's pleasantness, and sweetness of temper, and agreeable methods of making the hours pass at La Roquette. It seemed, Alma thought, almost a mania with her mother to talk about La Roquette to

Wynyard whenever she ceased to speak of Frank, and she found herself taking a miserable sickly interest, and criticising the few remarks that he made in reply to these praises. They never quite satisfied her. She always thought he said a word too much, or a word too little, when he had to speak about Emmie's perfections, and daily the sense of loneliness grew, hardening like a crust over her heart, and stiffening her manner till she hardly knew herself.

The days crept on, and October arrived, before the elders of the family could be roused to make any plans, or consent to a change of abode; but at length the reappearance of some symptoms in Lady Rivers of the illness from which she had suffered last winter, gave the necessary impetus to decision.

It was rather hastily determined that Sir Francis should take his family to San Remo, while there was still time for him to settle them there, before his duties called him back to London. Wynyard was to join Lady Rivers and Alma a little later on; and there would be no reason why the deferred wedding should not take place at San Remo about the end of the year, when Sir Francis would again be able to come out to them.

Wynyard urged this, trying to put things in the very best light, when the last days before his parting with

Alma came, and he insisted on having more of her company than she had afforded him hitherto. She listened to his plans, and tried to be hopeful—tried hard to soften out of the cold anger against herself and her circumstances, that held her like a possession. Sometimes she succeeded, telling herself that all might yet be well in a few weeks; and sometimes, while Wynyard talked of the pleasant southern air, and the sunshine that would gladden their next meeting, a deadlier heart-sickness than she had yet known assailed her; a vivid recollection of the sights, and sounds, and scents of Madelon's wedding-morning rose with Wynyard's words, and she whispered to herself that by no possibility could a day in that likeness bring her happiness. Oh, no! she had poisoned all such days for herself for ever, and could not, try as she would, see herself a triumphant bride, in circumstances that would bring her fault so livingly before her.

CHAPTER XI.

LONGHURST.

And now my heart caught new sensations of pleasure the nearer I approached that peaceful mansion. As a bird that has been frightened from its nest, my affection outwent my haste, and hovered round my little fireside with all the rapture of expectation.

Ueberall ist eine Freudenblume
In den Kranz des Lebens eingereiht.

“A BREAK and pair, how jolly, sent to meet us! You don’t mean it, Mildie.”

“Of course I don’t, you boys are to walk; hush Casa! Lord Anstice has come by this train, and the waggonette is sent for him; but the housekeeper at Longhurst, who is very considerate to mother, settled for Emmie and me to ride in it too, to save a cab, and there’s a cart waiting for everybody’s luggage.”

“The housekeeper at Longhurst considerate to mother! That’s the way you’ve learned to talk since you came here, is it?” snorted Casabianca. “You poor toady of a girl thing. I tell you, there’s room enough in that break for us all five, and for Lord Anstice, as you call him, as well. I’ll not be balked of a ride in a break

when I've a chance of getting it, I promise you, for any fool of the sort. There he is, getting out of a first-class carriage, looking, I declare, as mooney as ever he did before he was a lord, not smartened up one bit. Why on earth should we not all ride in a break with him? I shall just go up and ask him that."

Emmie had moved a little further down the platform, with Sidney and the Gentle Lamb hanging about her, to count her brother's boxes and her own as they came out of the van, and Mildie's remonstrance only sent Casa the more boldly forward on his enterprise.

"Oh, I say, don't you know me?" he exclaimed, coming up to Wynyard, who was rather absently looking round the once familiar Hurst station, which brought sundry half-sad, half-pleasant recollections of schoolboy and college days vividly back to him.

"He was as pleased as possible to be spoken to—he looked right down glad to see me," Casabianca averred to Mildie afterwards, and he was not far wrong.

Wynyard's thoughts during a solitary journey had not been altogether pleasant ones, and he was glad on the whole of something to give them a new turn. As he walked down the platform with Casa, he heard full details of the circumstances that had brought so many of the family to Hurst station that day.

“Of course you did not see us before, we travelled third-class, always do,” said Casabianca, magnanimous, if defiant. “Oh no, it did not hurt Emmie in the least, it’s of no consequence to her; *she’s* in no danger of meeting fellows who might chaff her about it afterwards. How does she come to be travelling down with us, do you say? She’s come to spend Christmas with mamma; came straight to London from the Hudson Kirkmans yesterday—the ironmongering Kirkmans up in the north, where she’s governess now, you know, worse luck. However, I don’t suppose they’ve a grain of chaff among them all; the boys there are all little cubs under eight, and they seem to make no end of a fuss with Emmie. Here we are, look out, Emmie!”—and then Emmie turned round from counting her boxes, and she and Wynyard met for the first time since they parted under the magnolia-trees at La Roquette, in the spring.

There was no recollection of that evening in Emmie’s frank, clear eyes as they rested on Wynyard’s face while inquiries and greetings were exchanged—no little flutter of manner, no blush or shyness to make the moment embarrassing. Wynyard was the most conscious of the two, afraid of satisfying the inclination he felt to look a second time in the quiet, soft eyes that had once said so much to him; he was the most disposed to make sudden

breaks in the conversation and turn away to inspect the luggage.

Of course Casabianca had his way, and the whole party packed themselves into the waggonette for the five miles' drive to Longhurst. The boys soon threw off any awe of Lord Anstice they had felt; and were in wild spirits as they were bowled along the country roads between the hedgerows, shouting to scare the rooks from the ploughed fields, and taking off their caps to the fieldfares and sparrows set in motion by their noise, with such ecstatic delight, as might be expected from a trio of town school-boys, on their first experience of a country drive at Christmas time. Emmie and Wynyard sat in opposite corners of the waggonette, and both took a very fair share in the mirth, while each carried on a train of separate thought and of observation of the other. Emmie was just a little disappointed in what she read in Wynyard's face when, now and then, he left off chaffing Casabianca on the astounding acquaintance with country life his remarks displayed, and fell into silence for a minute or two. She had expected to see such perfect satisfaction there. She had been in the habit of comforting herself whenever she felt a little lonely or downhearted during the long months from home, by reflecting how well all was with him, how perfectly all his dreams

had been realised, the summit of his wishes attained, that he, at all events, must be happy. Perhaps she had not exactly wished to witness the happiness with her own eyes, not being sure that for her there might not be a touch of pain in comparing his perfect joy with "the low beginnings of content" to which she had attained. Still she had been able to find comfort in the thought of his complete satisfaction; and now she was disappointed as a second and a third glance failed to show her what she had been expecting to see. While he was laughing and talking he was sufficiently like his old self, but directly his face grew grave, she felt the want of something that surely ought to have been there. Was it some mere temporary vexation, or could it possibly be an abiding discontent that laid such a weight upon his brow, and so altered the expression of his lips? As she was trying to satisfy herself on this point, Wynyard's eye woke up and met hers, and she felt a little confusion at having been caught in such earnest contemplation of him. She turned hastily away towards Sidney, and busied herself for several minutes in rubbing his cold hands till they were warm again; but the confusion was not ungraceful or overwhelming, it did not prevent Wynyard from continuing to look at her, and in his turn, studying her averted face, to make out the meaning of the change

that had passed upon it, since their sudden parting in the spring. The blooming fresh May rose,—had it lain in the dust till its delicate petals had lost their freshness and tender grace, or had it sheltered itself from injury by closing up into the bud stage again? Was this precisely the shy, shrinking Emmie West of old Saville Street days now before him, or a quite new development of the character? He perceived some signs that might have led to the first conclusion. There were certainly a good many reminiscences of Saville Street to be traced in Emmie's dress, which had quite lost the temporarily borrowed daintiness that had distinguished its La Roquette state; the clinging dusty *crêpe* trimmings of her dress, rumpled with the two days' journey, the worn gloves, the severely plain black bonnet that framed the fair face,—all at first sight brought suggestions of the earliest stage of their acquaintance; but a second glance removed the impression, and made these rather foils to heighten the change in her beauty that grew on his notice the longer he looked. The surroundings were the same, but they were worn with a difference. Emmie had grown above her clothes, and, let them be as shabby as they would, her loveliness could no longer be quenched by them in any degree; it had blossomed out into a sweetness and dignity that lifted it as much above danger of

eclipse from mere equipments, as a dazzling white lily is safe from gathering blackness from the earth it hangs above. Not that there had been any change in form, or feature, or colouring, it was the new expression in the face that gave it its new power and charm. The look of victory on the brow, the peace that dwelt on the lips whether closed or parted in smiles, the freedom from self and self-regardful thoughts, which every light and shade upon the clear countenance told of; it was this ennobling of the whole being which raised Emmie's beauty so far above the malice of her clothes, that in estimating the changes in her, it was impossible to give more than a passing thought to them, impossible any longer to pity her for the struggles or privations they told of. Pity! if Wynyard had been thinking of Mrs. Kirkman's young governess with any feeling of the kind, he was ashamed of it now, and felt contemptuously angry with himself for some compunctious thoughts he had been troubled with, on her account. It was evident that by some road or other, Emmie had climbed to a standpoint where it would be presumptuous in him to think of pitying her. Whether the long-drawn breath with which Wynyard dismissed a past anxiety, brought as much relief to his mind as it ought to have done cannot be determined.

Emmie came to an end of her cares for Sidney after a while, and raising her head, her eyes fairly met Wynyard's again, this time with a question in them: "What are you thinking of while you watch me so closely?" At the same moment her lips parted into a smile, proud and a little defiant, as she broke the silence with the first direct question she had addressed to him. "You will begin your journey to San Remo in a day or two, will you not? I had a letter from Aunt Rivers last week, in which she told me all their news. It is to be on the first day of the new year, is it not?"

"A good day for two people to turn their backs on old things, and start on a fresh life, don't you think?" said Wynyard.

While Emmie was wondering whether his tone of voice expressed quite as much satisfaction in the prospect as might have been expected, Mildie, full of recollections of that tear-stained leaf in Dr. Urquhart's dictionary which contained the history of the edible green frog, struck in with a string of questions that occupied Wynyard's attention, till the waggonette drew up before the door of Mrs. West's cottage. This well-timed curiosity drew out an explanation of Lord Anstice's sudden visit to Longhurst and circumstances connected with it, that were unknown to Emmie. Since the sudden

news of Frank's death, Sir Francis and Lady Rivers had felt a great shrinking from the idea of returning to Longhurst, where the happiest days of Frank's boyhood had been spent, and as the state of Lady Rivers's health seemed to make a long residence abroad desirable, they had decided on letting the house for a few years. A tenant had been found just as Sir Francis was about to start for the South of France, to join Alma and Lady Rivers at San Remo, where the twice postponed wedding (for Mrs. Anstice's death had caused a second delay) was at last to take place.

"A very quiet wedding," Wynyard explained, in answer to Mildie's eager questions; he did not know about bridesmaids, but there would certainly be, on both sides, a dearth of relations, unless he could persuade Madame de Florimel to come over from La Roquette, and be present on the occasion. Even Constance Forrest had been obliged to disappoint her sister of her support. After spending a month at San Remo with her mother, she had received a summons from her husband to rejoin him at once at Belforrest, and greatly to Sir Francis's surprise and disappointment had reappeared in London yesterday. No, Sir John Forrest was not ill, only out of sorts, and disinclined, Wynyard supposed, to lend the lustre of his own and his wife's presence to the wedding.

Something had put him out, and he chose to revenge himself on his wife's relations in that fashion. A wedding without a single guest would be something of a disappointment, he feared, to Lady Rivers, however little he and Alma might care about it.

"And Aunt Rivers will be quite alone after Alma has left her?" inquired Emmie, "for I suppose nothing will keep Sir Francis long from London."

"Not a day after the Christmas holidays are over; it would be cruel to ask such a sacrifice of him," said Wynyard. "I have planned an appeal to Madame de Florimel, and if I can carry her off to San Remo with me, I am not without hope that she will persuade your aunt to return with her, and spend the rest of the winter at La Roquette, where she would be, comparatively speaking, among old friends. Yes," he added, in answer to a look of Emmie's, "I am going straight to La Roquette, when I have finished the business I have undertaken to do for Sir Francis here. If I get through as well as I hope to do, I shall arrive at the château on Christmas-eve, about the time when the church will be lighted up, and our friends flocking to the midnight mass, and as I shall spend Christmas-day there, I cannot fail to come across some of our old acquaintance. Would you like me to take a message from you to

Madelon?" He said this in a commonplace tone, letting his eyes rest on Emmie's face, to show that he understood and accepted the footing of ordinary friendliness she had prescribed as the basis on which all future intercourse, including references to old times, was to be placed. He thought it well to make an allusion of the kind at once, since no comfortable relationship could ever be established between them, if either felt that there were topics in the background they had not courage to approach.

In the same spirit Emmie looked bravely back, and answered steadily, "I believe I owe Madelon a present, the cairngorm brooch which, you know, she ought to have had on her wedding-day. It is put away somewhere, and since you are so kind as to offer to see her for me, I think I will trouble you to take the brooch to her. How long shall you stay at Longhurst? I will send the packet by Casabianca to-night if you are going soon."

Wynyard explained that his business was to look over and bring away certain family letters and relics, chiefly relating to poor Frank, which Sir Francis could not bear to leave in the house, though he shrank from looking them over himself. The business would occupy one day at least, Wynyard thought; "but surely," he added, "we

shall meet again? Does not Mrs. West often come up to Longhurst?"

The waggonette was now turning in between two iron gates, and the next instant it drew up before a cottage of rather more size and pretension than an ordinary lodge. The front door stood open, and revealed, beyond the tiny entrance hall, a background of fire-lighted parlour, and cozily-spread tea-table, and the figure of Mrs. West with eager face and outstretched arms, hurrying, at the sound of wheels, to welcome the travellers. There was no time for farewells, scarcely for a handshake; Emmie was out of the waggonette the minute after it stopped, and in her mother's arms, forgetful of everything, even of the conspicuousness of figures in a fire-lit vestibule as seen from the dark road, while her face was pressed against her mother's, in their old fond caress.

At home, after her first independent struggle with the world! What a feeling of rest the thought brought with it, though there was nothing familiar, nothing to make the house she now entered home-like, but the tender clinging touch of the arms around her. Wynyard, who had never had a personal experience of such welcomings, looked curiously out of the gathering darkness back towards that square of warmth and light, and felt himself somewhat lonely and overlooked.

“I had thought of coming down this evening to see your mother,” he remarked to Casabianca, who alone lingered a moment, with his hand on the back rail of the waggonette, not covetous of his share of the caresses going, till inquisitive eyes were well out of the way. “I had thought of coming down here again later, but I suspect I should only be in the way. You will want this first evening quite to yourselves, no doubt.”

“Mother will, I daresay; she and Emmie won’t stop talking and kissing each other till midnight. They might think it a bore, perhaps, if you came in; but never mind, they’ll be able to spare me, and if you like, I’ll run up after tea and see how you are getting on, in the big house all by yourself. Oh, no, don’t object; it’ll be no trouble to me. I shan’t mind turning out in the dark, and besides, I’ve a reason of my own. I’m curious to know if they have put down the stair-carpets for you, and how the place looks in ’em. Yes, yes, I’ll be sure to come, and I’ll tell you what’s the joke about Aunt Rivers’s stair-carpets when I see you again.”

The last sentence was shouted out after the waggonette had started down the darkening road at a rapid pace, which soon reduced the glowing doors and windows of the cottage to small stars of light, shining alluringly through the gathering blackness.

Longhurst was a large, old-fashioned, somewhat dilapidated manor-house, standing in a considerable extent of ill-kept pleasure-ground, which Sir Francis had been lucky enough to purchase on very favourable terms years ago, when the possession of a place of their own in the country had been so exactly the summit of Lady Rivers's ambition, that she did not allow herself to be exacting as to advantages of situation or imposing aspect. Funds had always been wanting for the repairs and embellishments which Lady Rivers planned from year to year, as her views enlarged. Latterly, since her boys had grown up and gone out into the world, and her daughters been introduced, her interest had declined in a place that had only afforded them all a great deal of pleasure, and done less than she had expected towards increasing their consequence in the society where she wanted to shine. She became more and more unwilling to let her daughters waste important months in its solitude, or to spend money on its decoration that might be turned to better account; thus one or two summers had passed, bringing only flying visits from solitary members of the family, and the house had got a disused melancholy look, that struck Wynyard painfully, as he wandered about the well-remembered rooms in the interval between his arrival and the dinner-hour. He thought the whole

family might have been dead, to account for the funereal aspect that, to his fancy, hung over the old furniture, and the familiar nooks and corners, associated with so much mirth and fresh young life, such eager hopes and such dear love. Was it the hopes, the aspirations, the loves that were dead, that looked back with ghostly faces at him from every favourite haunt? How vividly the groups of youthful figures came back, and arranged themselves in the old way—Frank, Agatha, Constance, Lawrence, Alma, most changed of all! Oh no! himself most changed—who, on the eve of rejoining her, of making her his own for ever, could have a doubting, a disloyal thought of her—his own poor Alma! Poor!—had she come to be that, then, she who had been the radiant queen of his fancy, the loveliest, the rarest, the bright particular star set up for his heart's distant adoration?

Wynyard was pacing up and down the old school-room when these thoughts rose the thickest, and Alma's face kept coming back to him with the various expressions it had worn—in many an eager discussion they had had, standing or sitting just there or just here, on the spot over which he was walking at the moment—proud, tender, aspiring, contemptuous and satirical at times, but frank and true always. Why would not this

remembered Alma correspond more exactly with the Alma to whom he was going? What had come between his old dream and his present possession? Could he have believed it of himself, that he would pace this room the week before his wedding, with such doubts in his heart as he felt to-night; surely it was himself that was changed, not Alma? He must have grown suspicious and hard, not so ready as he ought to be, to make allowance for the natural effect of the ordeal she had passed through since she grew up. Could the finest nature have borne it quite unharmed? Was it not unreasonable in him to be disappointed, because her girlish frankness was changed into that indefinable something which always seemed to hide her true self from him now? Where was his faith, where the patience with which he had once thought to win her through years of waiting? Could they not win back for him his old Alma, as dear, as true, as frank-hearted as ever, when deteriorating influences were shut out by his closer possession? Wynyard's paces up and down the solitary dark room grew brisker as the more soothing thoughts asserted themselves, and drove away the gloom that had taken possession of him since morning. He had been battling all day against what he told himself was an unworthy suspicion, and now he concluded resolutely

to turn his back upon it. He would not make that comparison between sentences in Alma's late letters, and some information received that morning respecting Lady Forrest's doings at San Remo, which he feared might convict Alma of practising a good deal of reserve towards him, if not of putting a false colour on recent events. He would not be critical in weighing shades of meaning to see how far her narratives were purposely coloured; it was, perhaps, almost a necessity with Alma's subtle intellect to give to every event she related the colouring she wished it to wear, words would inevitably take that form of advocacy with her. How he had once admired the graceful address, the sparkling acuteness that had given her a magician's power of making everybody think as she pleased. And when the power had been exercised to shield someone else from blame—one of the boys, poor Frank, perhaps, or Constance—he had been used to see nothing but the generosity, the warmth of love, that gave the impulse to her subtle intellect. Could he not be as lenient now, when there were really important interests at stake, and it was still Constance whose levities needed the concealment of a mist of words?

Wynyard succeeded in reasoning himself into charity again with Alma, but his solitary meal in the dimly-lighted dining-room, which had seen so many pleasant

Christmas gatherings, was sufficiently depressing to make him not altogether displeased when Casabianca appeared, just as he was turning out for a stroll with a cigar in the grounds, before settling to the melancholy business to which he intended to give the rest of the evening. It was a soft, cloudy, winter's night, with occasional gleams of a full moon through deep chasms of cloud, and fitful gusts of rain-laden west wind, making wild music among the old oaks of the avenue they strolled up and down. Wynyard's thoughts soon wandered away from his companion, and were only brought back by fits and starts when his talk touched upon topics that fitted in uncomfortably with his own reflections. Perhaps a spice of provocation at the slight to his powers of entertainment, and of mischievous pleasure, when he discovered that he had hit upon a topic that could produce a sensation, gave Casabianca courage to venture again and again on ground that he well knew to be dangerous.

“You don't understand what I mean by saying that it's very good-natured of Mrs. Kirkman, the old fat one, you know, to make much of Emmie, and never to say anything disparaging of her—well—of her relations, when she is in the room. You don't understand? I should have thought you'd have had more nous. I understood well enough when Emmie and mother talked about it just

now. Mother began by telling Emmie something that old Mrs. Kirkman was heard to say when she was down here about Al—— what, you think I had better not repeat it, as it was not meant for you to hear? Oh, as you please; I don't care to repeat what people ain't anxious to hear, only I thought you wanted to understand, you gave such a start when I began about the Kirkmans at first. I've plenty to say, if you'll only listen. I had begun to tell you the names of our eleven, and the matches they played in, last year, and can go on with that if you like it better." By the time they had again reached the same spot in the avenue, however, Casabianca, like a fly driven from a sore spot, was circling round to the vexed topic again. "By Jove! how jolly the moon looks, coming out from under that cloud. How it shows off everything, to be sure. There, now, just look between the trees, do you see something shining on that little hill to your right, a good way off? Can you guess what it is? I can. It's the great gilt ball on the observatory at Golden Mount, shining like a star. If you carry your eye down, you'll see the outline of all the other buildings against the sky. A big place, isn't it? That second larger spot shining in the moonlight, will be the dome of the great glass-house, the winter-garden, that everyone talks about so much."

Wynyard stood still as he was desired, and looked at the massive outline with some curiosity, remembering as he looked, that Alma had reproached him for not having accompanied her there, to guard her against being overcome by its attractions. This time last year the ordeal was going on; the gilt ball and the winter-garden, the great staring, magnificent new house were being weighed against such recollections and such confessions of early love as he had been thinking over in the school-room just now. How near had she ever been in thought to yielding? He hated the question, and himself for asking it.

“Yes, I suppose that is Golden Mount,” he remarked, as they turned back towards the house, “but how do you come to recognise it so quickly? You have never been here since it was built, have you?”

“No, but I heard enough about it, and on a day that I’m not likely to forget. It was when they settled I was to go to Christ’s Hospital, and Emmie travel abroad with Aunt Rivers instead of Alma; I was in Aunt Rivers’s dressing-room, and I heard every word of the talk, and I have not forgiven Uncle and Aunt Rivers for it yet. Not that I ain’t getting on very well where I am, and like it fairly, petticoats and all. But it was riling, you must allow, to hear oneself treated as a sort of make-weight, thrown in to persuade mother to further

Aunt Rivers's plans for securing Golden Mount to Miss Alma. How she went on about the Kirkmans and Golden Mount; and what a pity it would be to take Alma out of the way of the good luck that had come to her. Just for nothing, too, as it turned out; for, after all the trouble they took, and the talk and fuss there was about it, Alma—but, oh! I say, I beg your pardon, I'd forgotten 'twas you she was engaged to now—I had, indeed, just for the moment. I really was thinking only of the shame it was that I should have to wear these miserable yellow stockings so long after she has changed her mind, and got something she likes still better for herself. I can't change, and get what I like as easily as all that, you see."

Casa looked boldly up into Wynyard's face for sympathy and condolence, but seeing an expression there that startled him, he was awed into silence for the whole length of the avenue, till they were again standing before the front door; then, fearing to be dismissed without an invitation to enter, he found his voice again.

"You are not offended, are you? I really did not mean to say anything you would not like to hear, but you see things are so changed. When I'm talking to you like this, it does slip out of my head that you are

Lord Anstice, and that it's you my cousin Alma is going to marry. I never thought of such a thing when I knew you before."

"As your cousin condescending to marry me, eh?" said Wynyard, smiling; "you are an outspoken young man, certainly, and I don't know that we need quarrel for that; but I advise you to take a hint and be a little more discreet in your reminiscences when we meet again. Dismiss all you have heard, or imagined, about the Kirkmans from this day forth from your memory, and we shall get on all the better together. You understand?"

"All right," said Casa, imperturbably; "and you'll let me come in, won't you, to take a look round the place? Perhaps I shan't have another chance, as the new people are coming in soon; and besides, there was something else I wanted to tell you."

Wynyard dryly remarked that Casa's confidences so far had not been so agreeable as to make him particularly anxious for more.

Casa's loquacity was not so easily quenched, however.

"It has not anything whatever to do with the Kirkmans, I promise you," he began, when he had taken a hasty survey of the hall and staircase, and, returning to the dining-room, had planted himself on the edge of a bureau

Wynyard was unlocking. "It ain't about the Kirkmans ; it's only something I remember about the last time I was here—something that's on my mind, and that I daren't talk about at home, so I'd best have it out with you and get rid of it. It all came back upon me when Mildie mentioned in the waggonette that mother had been busy seeing to the big house being smartened up and made ready for you. Poor mother ! I know what she was thinking about when she had the stair-carpets put down, and ordered a fire to be lighted in the hall, and that great curtain put up to keep out the draught ; and you ain't the delicate little chap that has just had scarlet fever. I daresay you wonder (knowing what the Riverses are, as you must do by this time) to hear that we Wests were ever invited to pay a visit to Longhurst ; but we weren't invited. This is how it happened. Some of us were ill two years ago. Mother took us to Ramsgate for a month, and father came to fetch us home at the end of the time. Poor little Willie had been getting worse instead of better, and as mother heard Aunt Rivers was staying here all by herself, she wrote to propose that she and father and Willie and I should come to Longhurst on the way home, and stop a few days, to give us all another change. Father did not like it, but mother hoped that when Aunt Rivers saw how seedy poor little Willie was, she would

invite him to stay on in the country for the rest of the summer, and keep me with him to amuse him when she and father went back to town. So she risked it, though I know she was trembling all through the journey lest anything should happen to annoy poor father, and make him feel he was not welcome. Well, we got here in a cab, for there was no waggonette sent to meet us, and I shall never forget the look that came over father's face as soon as ever we were well inside the house; no stair-carpet, no curtains, everything done up in dirty newspapers, and Aunt Rivers taking us to a little fusty-smelling back room, in the servants' part of the house, to have a school-room tea there all together. Father, who if he had nothing to eat but the sole of an old shoe, would expect it to be served to him properly! Aunt Rivers kept on explaining to mother how she was here alone because Sir Francis and her daughters had gone off to stay with some grand countess or another, and that she would not make strangers of relations like ourselves, by having the house put in order for us. 'Poor relations,' I heard father mutter to himself, and mother turned white, for she knew well enough then what would happen, and it did happen. Father insisted on our leaving Longhurst early next morning, though it was a wet day, and Willie's cough had been very bad all night, and a miser-

able journey we all had home to be sure. Everybody but me down in the lowest dumps you can imagine. Willie died, you know, a month or two afterwards. I don't suppose anything could have made any difference. No one said a word; I don't think mother ever told even Emmie about the stair-carpets; but I know what she thought, though I never talked of it to anyone until now. She used to come up into our attic of a night to hear the little ones say their prayers, and when she said the Lord's Prayer with Willie the last week or two, and he was almost too weak to speak the words, I noticed a choking there was in her voice, whenever she came to—'As we forgive them that trespass against us.' I know she had a struggle every night to do that for Aunt Rivers—thinking of those blessed stair-carpets. I ain't a saint like mother, and I can't say that I have forgiven her yet, so far at least as to forget the difference between rich and poor relations. I heard you say once that you had been snubbed by her yourself when you were poor, so you won't be very much surprised or disgusted, will you, if I don't change my feelings towards Aunt Rivers, even when she is your mother-in-law, and Alma your wife? As you did talk of asking me to come and see you at Leigh, it's only fair to give you warning."

"Very well," said Wynyard, "I am warned; and

now, if you will leave the bureau, and let me get at the drawer I want, I'll promise you that at all events you shall find carpets on the stairs whenever you come to Leigh. I would forget that old unfortunate visit to Longhurst if I were you; it's a bad habit to think of oneself as a poor relation, and you won't have any temptation to it for the future, with Alma and me. There, let us shake hands, and say good-bye, on an understanding that no allusions to Kirkmans or stair-carpets are to be allowed when we meet again."

It was a full hour after Casabianca took his departure before Wynyard turned his attention to the contents of the bureau-drawer, and meanwhile his thoughts were not pleasantly occupied. A schoolboy's foolish chatter, telling him nothing new, for, as Casabianca had truly said, he had known Lady Rivers too long and too well to receive any fresh light on her character at this date. What did that matter to him, so long as Alma stood clear, in generous truthfulness, and strong youthful indignation at the petty meannesses and worldlinesses, amid which she had grown up? Yes, so long as she *did* stand quite clear. His thoughts ever circling round the same point, did not come to any definite conclusion, but they had one practical result, which, however, Wynyard did not consciously connect with his doubts of Alma. He avoided

the inmates of the north lodge during the two days of his stay at Longhurst, and managed to complete his business and execute various commissions for Lady Rivers without making an appeal to Mrs. West for help. It might be her sad face he dreaded the sight of, or it might be Emmie's. Anyhow, his determination to keep out of their way went so far, that, when, during a last walk in the grounds he saw two distant figures in black approaching the house, he turned hastily in an opposite direction, and set out on a long circuit of the park, which did not bring him home again till after dusk. A little packet had been left at the house while he was away, and caught his eye as soon as he entered his sitting-room. It was directed to Madame Antoine Barbou, Le Vallon des Orangiers, La Roquette—favoured by Lord Anstice, in the corner.

Wynyard thought, as he put it into his pocket-book, that Madame Barbou was tolerably certain to receive her long-delayed wedding present this time. The ruby ring still lingered in an inner fold of the same receptacle, just where he had put it when he took it from Emmie's little letter; and it had so often brought back disagreeable reflections when his eye fell upon it unexpectedly, that he was not likely to lose a good occasion to rid himself of it. Objects that awaken painful recollections, how-

ever, have something the character of birds, and sometimes persist in attaching themselves to those who most wish them away. The cairngorm brooch had not yet come to the end of its adventures as a love-token, and was not destined to grace Madame Barbou's bosom till days when her bridal honours had long been left behind.

CHAPTER XII.

LA ROQUETTE IN WINTER.

I have been here before, yet scarce can tell
The outline of the hills ;
The light is changed—another voice doth swell
In those wild-sounding rills.

I have been here before, in sun and shade
A blythe green place it seemed ;
Here have I talked with friends, sweet songs have made,
And lovely things have dreamed.

THE magnolia-trees in front of the château looked almost as fresh and green as they had looked in the spring, when Wynyard came out on the morning after his arrival at La Roquette, to take a turn under them before the early breakfast, which Madame de Florimel always took, English-fashion, with her guests, in her favourite sitting-room opening on to the garden. At the first glance round, Wynyard thought there was very little in the scene before him to mark the change of season. The sunshine falling on the dry, dusty road was almost as hot and yellow as when he had last basked in it ; the shadows of the broad-leaved trees lay as clearly defined along the path ; the olives on the slope above were only a shade greyer ; the pines on the near hills a thought more dusky ; the distant

mountains as softly shaded in lilacs and blues, till they melted into the snow-range, which had not yet received its winter crown of new snow. Hardly a touch of change to show that it was midwinter, instead of spring, revealed itself to his first eager gaze; but when his eye had for some time taken in the familiar beauty of the landscape, a perception stole in, that he was viewing it under a new aspect. One little token after another forced itself on his notice, showing that even here, in nature's choicest playground, the active pulsings of growth and change had been stilled for a time. It was not, as in northern climates, a frozen death-like trance that held the forces of nature in abeyance: here it was rather as if a musical pause had come in the full-toned chorus of life—a moment's lull—to prepare the year for the fresh burst of music, the new throb of vitality which vineyard and garden, olive-grove and hill, were awaiting. Yes, it was winter, not spring. Down there a fig-tree shows its dry skeleton arms among the evergreen shrubs, a memento that “the time for the singing of birds” is not yet. The quince-trees are bare on the church-hill, the small stunted oaks by the river show conspicuous in a rich red-brown livery of faded leaves. It is winter, not spring. Nature has fallen asleep here too, but on a couch of flowers, overlaid with the treasures she dropped from

her hands when she went to sleep ; richly-scented over-blown roses, branches laden with luscious slow-ripening fruits. Fresh evidence of this was before Wynyard's eyes when he turned from looking over the landscape to the château. There, at the open window, with a bunch of yellow tea-roses in her hand, stood Madame de Florimel, beckoning him to come in to breakfast. Close beside her (for a few minutes ago the early morning mass had come to an end, and the women were flocking out of church) stood Madelon, just lifting from a basket on her arm the Christmas offering she had brought for madame, a great bunch of grapes from the sheltered vineyard behind Père Barbou's tall white house on the hill, where grapes ripened slowly, and grew luscious and full-flavoured at Christmas-time, with some red *pommes d'amour* from her mother's garden in the valley—the whole fastened together in a wreath, which, in spite of its Bacchanalian character, madame was expected to suspend in the hall, in honour of the *belle fête* Madelon was wishing her, when Wynyard came up. Fresh dimples and smiles broke out on her pleasant face at sight of him.

“ Ah ! if Antoine had but known that monsieur would be visible so early, the hope of seeing him would have brought him quickly enough to the village. Truly

he had not been so eager to take the first opportunity of attending to his duty as might be wished. Monsieur would understand, however, there were the mules to attend to, and the men were all alike, ready at an excuse to send their mothers and wives to pray in their place. Not that Antoine was altogether negligent, or would fail to be present at the great mass at eleven o'clock, and to pay his respects to madame and to monsieur also."

Madelon's shyness had altogether melted away during her eight months of matronhood, and she chattered on volubly, while she turned over the remaining contents of her basket to pick a bouquet for Wynyard from the flowers that had been scattered over her offering.

"*Tenez,*" she cried at last, "I've no May roses to offer monsieur to-day, but here is a little bunch of white violets, the first I have gathered since last spring. What is more, I plucked them from about the roots of the old olive-tree near my mother's house, where Mademoiselle Emmée loved to sit when the anemones were in bloom. Have I not pointed out the place a hundred times to Antoine, and do we not speak of the sweet demoiselle, and of monsieur too, every time we pass? Poor as the blossoms are, monsieur will accept them for a fête-day bouquet, and wear them with pleasure even, will he not?"

There was a meaning, congratulatory twinkle in Madelon's bright eyes as she held up her flowers, which Wynyard hardly knew how to meet; and, encouraged perhaps by the shade of embarrassment in his voice when he thanked her, Madelon added: "But how then is the dear, good young lady? Monsieur will have seen her lately, and perhaps even brings a word of greeting from her to us. Ah! how often we talk about her, Antoine and I; and what a happy day that will be for everyone in the valley when monsieur brings her to see us again, as no doubt will happen one day."

After this hint, Wynyard would have found it awkward to bring out the little packet Emmie had entrusted him with, so he confined himself to a promise of calling at Madame Barbou's house in the course of the day, and made a hasty retreat through the window into the salon, where madame was by this time waiting at the breakfast-table to pour out his coffee.

"Do not the people know what is to happen to me on New Year's Day?" he asked Madame de Florimel while he was drinking it. "I should have thought, as gossip is so rife at La Roquette, and its inhabitants take so much kindly interest in my affairs, that the prospect of such an event would have become known among them somehow."

“The news will keep until after the *belle fête* is over,” said madame shortly. “We are simple souls here, most of us, with few events in our lives, and the impressions of last spring have not faded from our remembrance as quickly as with people who see more of the world. Let me give my neighbours all the time possible to mitigate their surprise.”

This little growl was, however, the only mark of discontent with the present state of affairs that madame permitted herself, during her morning meal with Wynyard; and during the two sunny hours they afterwards spent in strolling about the château-garden. Perhaps she felt that she had gone a little too far even in saying so much as this, for she treated Wynyard to an especially gracious and sympathetic mood for the rest of the morning. Joseph Marie and the château politics were kept in an unusual degree in the background, while she turned the conversation on the late occurrences at Leigh, questioning Wynyard on the particulars of Mrs. Anstice’s last illness and death, and listening to his projects for the future well-being of the place of which he was now sole master. Alma’s name naturally came in here, and madame went so far as to accord some not ungrudging praise to her beauty, and to the talents for society that would make her a valuable helpmeet to Wynyard when he would have

to assume the position among the magnates of the county that was his due. The bell, tinkling for the mid-day service, was heard while they were still talking, and madame hastened into the house to get her prayer-book, and on her return invited Wynyard to accompany her across the road to church. She explained that there was just now no English service within reach—and, besides, how can one help wishing to kneel down with one's neighbours on Christmas Day? All the villagers seemed to be collected on the church hill; and the little open space by the door, under the trees, had been temporarily turned into a miniature fair. Booths had been put up for the sale of cakes flavoured with orange-flower, bon-bons, pictures, and medals; and the young men of the place and the children were hanging in groups about them, proposing, by-and-by, perhaps, to pass into the shady church for a few minutes when the last bell rang and the host was elevated, so as to secure the consciousness of having fulfilled a duty at the smallest possible expenditure of time. The inside of the church was, however, fairly well filled when madame and Wynyard took their places, just as the small procession, headed by the old curé, had reached the altar. All the candles in the church were lighted, and the various side altars decked with artificial flowers,

tawdry, perhaps, and not even clean, but sufficiently attractive to draw a great many eyes to them; round, wondering children's eyes, which had not yet seen the fête flowers so often as not to look in hope of discovering fresh beauties; and aged eyes, to whom they were in truth Ebenezers, witnesses of past blessings, reminders of sorrows overcome, speaking with familiar faces of memories which their yearly reappearance had peacefully measured out. Madame kept her eyes dutifully fixed on her book, but Wynyard allowed his to wander, not critically, but sympathetically to the faces of the worshippers. Was it worship exactly? A service droned on in the old priest's husky monotone, accompanied by the shrill voices of the village scholars. At certain intervals knees were devoutly bent, and heads bowed; a few old women here and there had books in their hands, and their lips went on moving, but on Christmas Day, you see, at La Roquette, it was the custom to bring all the babies, under a year old, to church, to show the progress they had made since their christening to the King of angels in His guise of a baby. How could it be, but that proud young mothers, and doting grandmothers, and sympathetic neighbours, or friends from distant valleys, should notice this progress as well, and telegraph glances of congratulation and inquiry to each other

across the church? Toinette, who was married here at this time last year, and who lives ten miles away on the mountain, has brought her baby, and Pauline, who, after seven years of childless marriage, received the crown of motherhood only three months ago, is lifting hers to the height of her arms, that old paralytic Mère Barbou, who only comes to church on Christmas Day, may get a full view of her boy's beauty. Is it worship? Or, if not, may not the loving thoughts that fill hearts to overflowing, the friendly sympathetic glances that pass from eye to eye, the soft cooings and babblings, reverently hushed with mothers' kisses—may not these be as acceptable as worship to Him, who makes Himself known as the Babe of Bethlehem to-day? The old verger came round with his jingling pewter-plate before this question received a satisfactory solution in Wynyard's mind, and half-absently, half under the influence of these reflections, he dropped in an offering of English gold pieces, at which Madame de Florimel frowned, for she knew how it would be talked of in the village, and compared with the modest Christmas offering which Monsieur le Comte permitted himself, when he happened to be staying at the château at Christmas-time.

Madame de Florimel had business at Terres Blanches for the afternoon, and when she heard of Wynyard's

intention of calling on Madame Antoine Barbou, she proposed that he should drive first to the maisonnette, and then take the short cut through the vineyard to Madame Barbou's house, returning to rejoin her when the visit was paid, so as to secure a passing glimpse of the principal features of her mountain farm, in its winter aspect.

"Not," madame observed, as Wynyard was slowly driving her up the steep hill, where the clump of cactuses grew, "not that I mean now to keep true to the promise I rashly made one afternoon last spring. You may remember, unless more important events have swept everything that was promised, or implied on that occasion out of your mind, my promise to give up possession of Terres Blanches to you as soon as you were married, as well as leave it to you in my will when I died. I have no right to go back from my word, perhaps, but it was given under such different circumstances, on such a different understanding, that I feel sure you will see the reason of my change of purpose."

Wynyard hastened to assure madame that he had no covetous desires after the possession of Terres Blanches, paradise as he held it to be. Then, suddenly withdrawing his eyes from the clump of cactus, at which he had been looking, to fix them steadily on madame's

face, he added: "But do not suppose I had forgotten your generous intention, or anything else that was spoken or implied that day. I have tried too hard to forget it all, to succeed very well; there—that was a larger admission than I at all intended to make, and to qualify it, and justify myself somewhat, I should like you to know that no other promise was made to be broken, that day, but your own."

Madame put her hand over Wynyard's unoccupied hand, and her face cleared.

"That is well; that relieves me of some self-blame, at all events. And now, one thing more, you were not engaged to Miss Rivers the whole time—you were not playing with my dear little Emmie, and deceiving me, just when I thought we were more united in heart than I have been with any relative for years."

It was Wynyard's face that clouded now. Madame de Florimel was surprised to see the deep flush of anger and pain that overspread it.

"Do you take me for a villain?" he cried. "I wonder you let me come to see you, and sit beside you in the carriage if you have been thinking such things of me. I wonder you ever spoke to me again."

"Do you?" madame answered. "Alas! you see I know already too much of men! I should have to

be very silent—there would have been very little intercourse with those belonging to me in my life, if I had felt myself entirely cut off from them at every offence. You must allow, too, remembering our conversation the last time we were at Terres Blanches together, that there was much in your conduct that may well have puzzled me.”

“And myself too,” said Wynyard, gloomily. “Don’t expect me to explain or excuse myself, for I can’t. In spite of a good deal of curious self-questioning, I believe I have as little comprehension of how it has all come about, as you can have. ‘Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?’ I should have asked, if anyone had prophesied the various changes of mind I have passed through since this time last year. What remains, however, is that I am to be married on New Year’s Day to Alma Rivers, whom I loved long ago, and do love, and there is no use in saying more about it. Luckily, there is the maisonnette in sight already, and if I mistake not, Jean Baptiste has spied us out from the top of the medlar-tree, where he was no doubt looking after the last gleanings of madame’s fruit. He will have roused the house, and there will be a crowd at the gate to welcome us before we have managed this last steep bit of the road. If I wish to escape further embarrassing questions I think I had better beat a retreat through the

lucerne and round by the rose-tree hedge into the valley.”

But madame would not hear of her escort deserting her thus basely in sight of the goal. She insisted on being driven up to the front door of the maisonnette.

When once they had alighted together, she detained Wynyard another minute or two—minutes that had the destinies of two lives on their wings—to observe how many summer flowers were lingering in the sunny front border that caught every ray of southern sunshine. Yet even here, in spite of genial warmth and flowers, it was winter that reigned, not spring.

“What was there in the smiling landscape to betoken his sovereignty?” Wynyard asked himself, when at last madame had set him free to take the road to the valley. Was it the silence? Ah yes, how still everything was around him.

Wynyard stopped and listened. He had moved so far away from Madame de Florimel and La Fermière, that their voices, eager on some domestic matter, made only one note in the distance. What a contrast it was to the full chorus of sounds he had been used to hear on this very spot a few months ago! The green frogs were all silent, lying hidden in their oval-shaped tank at the bottom of the garden. The cicadas’ eternal song had ceased from

the trees and the grass. No nightingales called to each other now from side to side of the ravine, nor answering human voices of labourers at work among the vines. A depth of quiet reigned from hill to hill as far as the eye could reach. No movement anywhere, not even the flutter of a bird.

A minute longer, and the deep stillness to which Wynyard listened was broken. A shrill whistle came, and the sound of regular footsteps pattering down the road. The *facteur*, with his bag of letters, bringing news from the outside world, had come in sight of the maisonnette, and was calling the attention of the inhabitants to his approach.

Wynyard, though he was already close to the vineyard-gate, turned and walked back towards the house. The pause of thought, the hush, the sacred silence was over—at least for him. Here was business, here was anxiety, personified by the old *facteur*, and he had of his own accord gone to meet it.

Madame de Florimel and La Fermière came up and stood with Wynyard watching the old man as he unstrapped his wallet, at the bottom of the steps where Emmie used to stand expecting him.

The last letter to come out was one for Wynyard, and

madame handed it to him with a meaning smile, not lost on any of the bystanders.

“From San Remo, of course?” she said.

“Not at all,” Wynyard answered, after a hasty glance at the address. “Do not you see the English stamp and postmark? It comes from Leigh, and has gone first to Longhurst, I see, and been directed on.”

“Ah, I only glimpsed a lady’s hand, and drew my own conclusion from the thickness of the letter. Not a safe proceeding with a man of such large correspondence with ladies as yourself.”

“That large correspondence is another false conclusion. I have only two lady correspondents in the world, and this one of the two, Miss Moore, can hardly have anything more important to write to me about than the Leigh charities, which fell into her hands during Mrs. Anstice’s illness.”

The talk was in English, but Madame Dallon seemed interested in it, for she drew a little nearer, and her broad smiling face suddenly took an expression of perplexity and recollection.

“Monsieur has a letter,” she exclaimed, putting her finger to the end of her nose, with a puzzled air, “*Tenez, regardez un peu*, will he permit that I cast my eye on the outside? Yes, yes, that recalls to my mind something

which escaped me till this very moment, but of which I doubtless ought to have spoken to madame some weeks ago. It was during the time while we were busy drawing off the wine from our big cask, that wine which tasted so well, and which madame ordered us to put into bottles to be ready for Monsieur le Comte, when he should send for it. Madame will remember the anxiety it cost us, and will not blame me too much for having put the letters aside on the shelf, the moment after I discovered them lying among the corks in my bureau-drawer, and for having always forgotten to speak about them to madame till now, when, seeing this letter in monsieur's hand, recalled them to my mind. I speak of two thick letters directed to Monsieur Anstice, which have remained unopened in my bureau-drawer among the corks since monsieur left La Roquette last spring. No, madame, I am not mistaken," for Wynyard and Madame de Florimel simultaneously uttered an exclamation of incredulity. "Stay, they are on the shelf at this moment, and if monsieur and madame will follow me into the north store-room, they will see."

"Printed papers, no doubt," remarked Wynyard, "which in a lazy mood I must have buried among the corks one afternoon, though I don't remember anything of the kind. It is hardly worth while waiting for them, is it?"

He followed Madame de Florimel into the house, however, with some dawning curiosity, as to which of the moods of last spring, what particular day or incident, the disinterred letters would bring back. It was quite certain to be one, to which his present feelings were sufficiently alien, to make the contrast piquant.

Madame Dallon had the packet in her hand already, when he entered the room, and was blowing away the accumulated dust of many weeks from its upper surface before handing it to him.

Madame de Florimel intercepted it on its way, to satisfy her curiosity first.

“Two letters unopened, positively, you see, Wynyard, and their latest postmark the 3rd of May. So long ago, and you have never missed them ! I trust no important communication may be found within.”

“Not likely,” said Wynyard, stretching out his hand to reclaim his own long-lost property.

“But how could Lord Anstice’s letters have found their way into your bureau-drawer among the corks, Madame Dallon ? ” persisted Madame de Florimel.

“The 3rd of May ; why, that was the very morning we started on our mountain tour ! They must have been delivered here an hour or two before we left. I recollect it all perfectly ; Jean Baptiste brought me some letters

while I was waiting in the carriage. Why were not these among them? If you remember, Wynyard, you never came up to the house at all that day."

Wynyard made no answer; he had turned over the uppermost letter with the London postmark directed in a clerkly hand, and had come upon a half-sheet of note-paper which lay between the two letters, entangled in the folds of the second envelope; he was stupidly staring at some words written on it, as if the surprise of seeing them were drawing his eyes from his head.

Madame turned impatiently to La Fermière.

"But this is perplexing," she went on; "how can I have confidence for the future in allowing my letters to be kept at the maisonnette, if accidents of this kind can happen? If Jean Baptiste is capable of hiding letters among the corks, how do I know how many of my son's may not be lying in other drawers of the bureau at this moment? It must be inquired into!"

"Jean Baptiste,—the poor child!" exclaimed madame, hotly: "how should he be capable of such conduct? If you talk of hiding, I may as well tell madame the truth, though the notion that the young English lady, who was so proud as hardly to allow herself to be spoken with, should have any other *motif* in putting the letters into the drawer than that nobody wanted them, had not

entered my mind, till madame used the word 'hiding.' Indeed, I should have made a point of bringing the packet to the château myself, had not Jean Baptiste told me, on the very day when we turned them out from among the corks, that he himself saw the young lady drop the letters into the drawer and shut it quickly, while he was looking on at her through the window. What could I suppose but that she would tell madame and monsieur what she had done, when she joined them in the carriage half an hour afterwards, and that they had not thought it worth while to inquire further? If I have judged wrongly, I trust madame will forgive me. I trust, indeed, that monsieur finds no ill tidings in the letters that have been so long in coming to him."

The last sentence was uttered in quite a different tone of voice from the previous ones. Madame Dallon's eyes had strayed, while she was speaking, to Wynyard's face, and a sudden perception of how strangely it had changed during the last few minutes, had come over her. Madame de Florimel looked also, and there was a sudden hush in the little room.

Wynyard had drawn out the half-sheet of note-paper that lay between his letters, while Madame Dallon was speaking, and, crushing it in his hand, had thrown it from him on to the ground, and then it was, when the

writing on the second envelope became visible, that his countenance changed, so as to attract the attention of the other two.

“What is it, Wynyard?” Madame de Florimel said at last, alarmed by his fixed stare at the paper, and the grey pallor to which his cheeks and lips had turned. “What is it? You look as if you had seen a ghost!”

“Something like it,” Wynyard answered, drawing a deep breath, and recovering himself with an effort.

“Look, madame—but you will not know the writing as well as I do. Poor Ralph! This must have been the last letter he ever wrote, and the sending it almost the last thing he ever did. For, see, one of the postmarks is Strome, the place from which the boat sailed that went down with him.”

“And to think of a letter of so much interest remaining for eight months shut up in Madame Dallon’s drawer!” exclaimed Madame de Florimel. “One cannot understand such carelessness; one cannot imagine how such a thing could have occurred!”

“But I have been explaining to madame precisely how it did happen. Shall I then call for Jean Baptiste, and will madame hear herself what he has to say? There can be no question of forgetting, for it was on the morning of Madelon Claire’s wedding, and Jean Baptiste

followed the *facteur* to the door, and saw him give the letters into the young English lady's own hand. Like a child he peeped in at her through the open window of this room to which she had carried them ; and if madame or if monsieur would like to cross-question him——”

But Wynyard made a violent gesture of dissent.

“No, no, let it alone ; ask no more questions. For Heaven's sake, madame, let the matter rest !” he exclaimed, almost angrily to Madame de Florimel, who began to remonstrate. “Excuse me, I must be alone to read my letters, and I am going now to the valley. If I do not come back by the time you have finished your business here, do not wait for me. You will be able to find someone else to drive you home, shall you not ?”

“Yes, yes,” said madame, “go, but mind you come back to the château before dark, and looking a little less miserable if you can. After all, we have known of your poor cousin's death this eight months, and that a letter, written by him a long time ago, should come to hand here, is startling, certainly ; but it does not alter anything.”

Wynyard was out of the house before madame finished speaking, and as she did not, after his entreaty, like to question La Fermière further, and as the business which had occupied her a few minutes ago seemed of

small interest compared to this affair of the letters, she remained for some time longer in the little store-room, casting searching glances up at the high shelves, down into the deep drawers, in hopes of discovering some clue to the satisfaction of her curiosity. Her eye fell at last on the crumpled half-sheet of foreign note-paper which Wynyard had thrown from him, and feeling convinced that whomsoever it concerned, it ought not to be left for everybody's inspection, she picked it up, smoothed it out carefully, folded it, and put it inside her glove, to restore it to its owner, if indeed Wynyard were its rightful owner.

Madame had had no intention of reading the writing; but in the process of smoothing out the paper the signature, and a few words that went before, almost forced themselves upon her notice. "I hope to hear soon that you have acted successfully on my hint; I do so want one of us to be happy. Your sister, Constance Forrest."

The words did not at first convey any particular meaning to her mind, but she reverted to them in thought again and again, while she hastily finished her business with Madame Dallon, during her solitary drive home, and during the long hours when she waited in the chilly dimly-lighted château drawing-room for Wynyard's return.

It was dark, pitch dark, before her waiting was over. Madame became uneasy, and even went again and again to the windows and undid the jalousies to look out on the road, made dimly visible by the reflected lights from the houses in the village. What could there be in those letters of eight months ago to cause a person to stay out so many hours in the dark and increasing chill of a winter's evening? Madame would not allow herself to feel positively alarmed, but the time passed slowly, and she could not, by the most vigorous efforts, force herself to take in the purport of the Christmas Day sermon she set herself to reading, when the lights were brought in. Sometimes it was poor Ralph Anstice's handwriting on the outside of that letter, which floated between her eyes and the printed words; sometimes it was the sentence signed "Constance Forrest," which perhaps she ought never to have read, and which now suggested a solution of the mystery of the hidden letters, that would look probable, however reluctant she felt to entertain it. Should she mention the suspicion to Wynyard? How could she find words in which to convey such an insinuation against the woman who was to be his bride next week? On the other hand, how was a misgiving of such magnitude to be borne in silence? In spite of all her thinking, madame could not come to any decision.

CHAPTER XIII.

LOVE'S VAIN EXPENSE.

How strange to commune with the dead!
Dead joys, dead loves ; and wishes thwarted ;
Here's cruel proof of friendships fled,
And, sad enough, of friends departed.

WYNYARD, meanwhile, had taken the road into the valley, making his way at a rapid pace through the little pine-wood, and down a steep winding-path, to the heart of the ravine. He passed the entrance to Antoine Barbou's house on the hill without noticing it, and was equally oblivious of the picturesque winding-path he had once helped Emmie West to climb, which led to the Orange-tree House. The original purpose of his walk had entirely passed from his mind, and he was now only anxious to be alone with his own thoughts, and to find a spot where he should be free from every possibility of interruption, before he proceeded to examine the letters that had come into his possession by such a strange chance. Poor Ralph ! The touch of the paper upon which his

fingers had rested so long ago was like the unexpected clasp of a vanished hand held across a dark gulf of silence. But it was not that thought that kept Wynyard's mind in a whirl of perplexity and agitation as he walked rapidly on. The prospect of having a last word from a lost friend, of receiving perhaps some small everyday request or trifling commission from one who had passed beyond the reach of service, would have been, not painful, but soothing, after the first shock of surprise was over. What really troubled Wynyard was the fact that these letters had been so long in coming to him. He hardly dare ask himself what motive had prompted the hand that dropped them into the bureau-drawer, out of his reach possibly for ever ! He had heard the conversation between Madame de Florimel and Madame Dallon, and he understood quite distinctly that it was of Alma they spoke, and of what they accused her. The impression had come to him through the tumult of emotion awakened by the first sight of Ralph's handwriting—a muffled blow which he had received half-dreamily, half-stupidly at first. Then, for a little while, he fought hard against the conviction, as the particulars related grew clear in his memory, and he perceived how they fitted in with other circumstances and brought a complete explanation of many enigmas. Next came back

the impression left on his eye, rather than on his mind, by the writing on the half-sheet of note-paper entangled between his letters. "Your affectionate, Constance Forrest," and something about a hint and a wish. Ah yes! and Constance Forrest had been one of the first people to hear about Ralph's death, Lawrence had told him that in his letter; the sentence, hardly noticed at the time, recurred to his memory now with a bitter significance. Hateful as the suspicion was, facts pointed too clearly towards it, for it to be kept at bay any longer. Alma, then, had heard of Lord Anstice's death some days before it was known to him. The tidings had evidently reached her, in a letter from her sister, on the very day they started on their journey up the mountain; and she had kept back his letters of that morning for fear they should convey the news to him too soon for her purpose. That was the explanation of her love confession by the river. She had known of his change of fortune all the time; when she had shed those tears over her drawing that had moved him so deeply, when she had reproached him for misjudging her, when she had held up her tearful face for the betrothal kiss; it was the man who could make her a countess she had kissed, not her old love. And he had sometimes been such a fool as to imagine that she had loved him the less for his pros-

perity, that her late shyness and coldness had arisen solely from disappointment that she had lost the chance of proving her love to be disinterested, and must consent to receive more than she had bargained for, when she had accepted him ! He had deceived himself about her, so far as that ; and all the while she was rejoicing in having successfully manœuvred, which was the first consideration with her. Wynyard came to a sudden pause in his rapid walk as his mind reached this conclusion. He had been hurrying blindly on, as if rapid motion could carry him out of the reach of the conviction that was gaining on him. Now he stood still, the worst was here in his mind and in his heart. For a little while the dark floods of anger and pain overwhelmed him ; his head swam round and his eyes darkened, and he was forced to lean against the friendly trunk of an old olive-tree while he wrestled with himself and strove to recover a degree of calmness.

Once before his love had received, as he believed at the time, a death-blow, and he had felt as if all that was best in himself must die with it. He had then seemed to see his love, the ideal of his youth, stricken down and lying dead, a cold discrowned corpse, in his heart. Here again was the same pain, not so sudden or so sharp perhaps — for had Alma ever quite regained her old

empire over his imagination?—but profounder, more despairing; for, crowned or discrowned, loved or unloved, she was to be his wife before the week was out. That faint silver bow in the sky, which he could just see through the silvery olive-branches, would wax into their honeymoon! He must go to meet the day, that ought to be the crowning day of his life, with this doubt, this death in his heart, conscious all through his life of deceit, of rottenness, where he would fain trust most utterly. Wynyard tried hard to conquer his anger and the sense of injury he felt from having been so played upon, and to hush these into pity and forgiveness. Well, she should have what she had plotted to gain; and if the tender, adoring love, the high esteem once hers, was now wounded to death, she would perhaps never discover the hurt to which it had been subject, never recognise it as a loss. Love had counted for nothing with her, beside the wealth and the rank that would be hers all the same.

The gathering darkness in the ravine aroused Wynyard to a consciousness of where he was, and what had still to be done. He had determined to read Ralph's letter before he returned to the château, while he was out of reach of Madame de Florimel's kindly, if perhaps too inquisitive eyes, and he perceived that unless he

betook himself to the task at once, there would not be light enough to make out the writing. The spot where he had stopped abruptly, led to the end of the ravine where the path turned and sloped upwards through terraces of olives and belts of pines to the high mountain road above; and, before he took the letters from his pocket, he climbed the ascent, to a point on the hill-side, where the rays of the setting sun still lingered. There he found a seat, on the felled trunk of a pine-tree, and settled himself to read. At the moment, this spot was somewhat less silent and solitary than all the rest of the road had been; for a flock of sheep and goats, led by a little shepherdess, had followed him up the ascent, and were now spreading over the brow of the hill. The barking of the dog, the tinkling of the sheep-bells, and the girl's voice, sometimes calling to her dog, sometimes breaking out into a monotonous song, filled the air and awoke the mountain echoes, with a harmony of rustic sounds, that continued to be heard long after the last straggler of the flock had disappeared from sight. It was the very same flock of sheep Emmie West had watched, coming down to the valley through the olive-grove, eight months ago, on the evening when, as she believed, she left her careless girlhood behind her. They and their little guardian had made the ascent and descent

from hill-top to valley, every day since, tinkling the same bells, singing the same song, without any sense of monotony.

To the little shepherdess, these eight months had been just like any other spring, summer, and autumn, of her quiet life, bringing no changes, but the necessary changes of the season; and there was nothing special in her thoughts to-day, as she climbed and sang, except, perhaps, an underconsciousness that to-day was the day of the great fête, and that all the candles on the altars were lighted for benediction in the church below. That, with her, was cause enough for another louder repetition of the refrain of her canticle as she gained the brow of the hill, and caught a distant glimpse of the church tower—"Ave, ave, Maria."

The monotonous sounds reaching him again and again had a soothing effect on Wynyard's ear, bringing a sense of peace, of wider interests than his own, of some One above all, embracing all, on whom to rest, even if the framework of his own private existence was reeling around him, which steadied him for his reading. He first opened the larger packet, directed to him from his London chambers, and found, as he expected, among the collection of letters of no particular interest, the telegram from Scotland, announcing his cousin's death, and a letter

from the friends with whom Mrs. Anstice was staying, urging him to come immediately to Scotland. He could not look at them without a question flashing through his mind, as to how far the circumstances of his life would have been changed, if they had come to him in their natural course. He should certainly have obeyed the urgent letter that summoned him to Scotland, and hurried home by the most direct route, thus avoiding the mountain journey that had thrown him again with Alma. She would never probably have given him that explanation of her relations to Horace Kirkman, which he now believed to be untrue. The aura of that evening walk through the valley with the village bride, the scent of the gathered quince-blossoms, would have been lingering round his heart, when he first realised his changed fortunes; and the question that would have come spontaneously—he knew it now—would have been, not how the change would affect Alma, but what sort of a look of wondering love and glorified gratitude would dawn on Emmie West's gentle true face, when he told her about it, and asked her to share it with him.

It was worse than useless to picture that look now, he must never allow himself to realise that he had thrown away the true jewel to take the false. The past was past, and the possibilities of eight months ago could not

be recalled now any more than the reading of these words of Ralph's, written in full strength and youthful vigour, could bring back the writer to the living world, and to the eager purposes and emotions that had pulsed in his heart while he indited them. It was a long letter for Ralph, Wynyard saw that, when he unfolded the sheet written over in the well-remembered dashing scrawl. What sort of revelation of the dead man's last thoughts would it be?

“DEAR WYNYARD,

“Once more I write to you to help me out of a difficulty; you will call it the worst scrape I've ever got myself into as yet, and I answer triumphantly that at all events it is the last I shall ever ask your good offices to tide me through, for I have taken unto myself another helper and conscience-keeper who will have to bear the responsibility of my escapades for the future. There, the murder is out! I see the dark frown of alarm and anxiety that furrows your brow as you read. Dear old fellow! you are in a great fright; you think I have done for myself altogether now, and that you and my mother will have to sit in sackcloth and ashes over me for the rest of your lives. Cheer up; and you will see 'tis not so bad, when you come to look at it, as it sounds

at first. I am married, it is true, married a month ago, and I have not had courage to tell my mother about it yet; but it is going to be the making of me, and I feel myself another man from the one you have known so long, as I write. Do you remember one evening last November, when you and I got involved in a street-row in which a young lady was knocked down and injured? Do you remember her sister, the pale blue-eyed girl we had noticed before the row began? Perhaps not; for I recollect you had nothing to the purpose to say about her, when, a little time before you went abroad, I turned the conversation on the two Miss Moores, intending to throw out a feeler. I should perhaps have confided in you then—if you had shown more discrimination—a clearer impression of the individuality of the little red-haired sister, as you chose to call her. It is she who is my wife now; we were married in London on the fifth of last month, at St. Saviour's Church, Marylebone; and you must not suppose that the secrecy with which I have conducted my grand *coup*, is due in the smallest degree to my being ashamed of my choice. I glory in it, and would have the whole world to know—except my mother—the only person, you will say, who has any right to complain of not having been consulted beforehand. Well, you know her, and you know how utterly useless it

would have been to hope for her consent or sympathy. What is more, I had always, whenever such a thought as marriage crossed my mind, set my heart on having just such a mufti wedding, and just such a honeymoon journey as I absolutely attained; don't ever let us ever say again, that nobody ever realised the summit of his wishes. I don't deserve such happiness, that's the truth. It has, you will be glad to hear, opened my eyes a little to my own shortcomings, and caused me to make sundry resolutions, of which this letter to you is the first-fruit. You see I want to cut off from myself all chance of retreat, in case when I am with my mother and find her hard to come over, I should be disposed to repent my present purpose, and revert to my original design of keeping my marriage quiet for a year or two. It would be the best, or at all events the pleasantest course for me, if my conscience, and Christabel, would let me stick to it. You will keep me up to the mark, I know, and I hope, be sufficiently interested and excited by what I have told you, to make it convenient to hurry back to England, and come on here as soon as you can, to see the end of the game. My mother has perhaps told you, that she left Leigh two months ago, in a fit of high disgust with me for my frequent absences from home and other misdemeanours. I was courting Miss Christabel Moore, you

see, at the time, in the orthodox guise of a young artist (*vide* the Lord of Burleigh), and could not be expected to keep up appearances in other quarters. My mother went off to stay with her friends, the Macphersons, who, for the last two summers have, on her invitation, occupied my old fishing-lodge at Tarver, and effectually shut me out of it. As that is about the worst possible place for my poor mother to go to, in her present state of health, there she went, to spite me, I suppose, and bring me to my senses. And so, the other day, on returning from my quiet wedding-journey, I found a telegram, to say she was taken worse, and wanted me to come to her at once. I hope the increased illness is only an overture to reconciliation, but I can't be sure; and anyway I am sorry for the delay, and have hurried on at inconvenient speed to lessen it as far as possible. I write this letter while I am waiting at the little inn at Strome, for a boat to take me across, and shall give my letter to the waiter to post before I sail. After that I shall look for you to put in an appearance at Tarver shortly, and, as I said before, keep me up to the mark. You may wash your hands after that, of your Benedict cousin,

“ ANSTICE.

“ P.S.—I long for you to see *her*, Christabel; she does

not know yet that I am anything but a rather unsuccessful artist, whom she will have all her life to keep up to his work. Though you mayn't believe it, I dread telling her the truth almost as much as I dread telling my mother, lest my courting, and winning, and marrying her in character should not seem so legitimate a joke to her as it did to me when I planned it. She is worth a hundred of me, remember that, and stand up for her, through thick and thin, everywhere, and before everyone, whenever you have the chance, 'an you love me.' "

Before Wynyard reached the last words the shock of surprise was over, and his thoughts were busied looking back through a variety of small incidents and signs that had come under his notice during the past year. With the light of this sudden revelation on them, they now seemed significant enough to have prepared him for the news, or, indeed, to have brought it to his knowledge long ere this. Christabel Moore—the dull, drizzling, November evening of Katherine Moore's accident, with all its varied incidents, flashed back on his memory with more vividness of interest than the reality had had at the time. It was the beginning of his intimacy with the Wests—of a great deal else as it seemed; but the bearing of what he had just read on his own future fortunes did

not suggest itself yet. He was not ready for that, his thoughts were busily engaged in an effort to straighten out the past and make its mysteries plain. Yes, this was the true explanation of the appearance of the Moores at Leigh, and of their interest in Mrs. Anstice. He recalled an expression he had seen on Katherine Moore's face one day, when Mrs. Anstice had been speaking of her son, which had struck him at the time as too full of pity and comprehension to be natural, coming from a stranger: the little pictures, too, so full of suggestion, the poor widowed bride had consoled herself by painting and sending to her fellow-mourner, whom it seemed she dared not, or did not choose to approach in any other way. This news accounted, too, for some words spoken by Katherine Moore on the last occasion when he had seen her, on the day after Mrs. Anstice's death. Wynyard had thought them at the time rather uncalled-for generalities against confidence in worldly prosperity, and the need in all human lives of preparedness for change, and had only accounted for Katherine Moore's addressing them to him on the supposition that her affection for Mrs. Anstice made her take it amiss that he should stick to his intention of starting on his journey to Italy immediately after the funeral. Her warning words and evident wish for the postponement of his marriage took a fresh signi-

ficance now with this light on them, and brought him at last to the perception of a possible vital concern of his own in this new aspect of affairs. Then he remembered the letter from Katherine Moore, which the *facteur* had placed in his hands that day, and taking it out of his pocket prepared to read it, with a foreknowledge in his mind of what it had to tell him. It did not surprise him that the letter began :

“ DEAR MR. ANSTICE,

“ The last ten days have been a time of bitter anxiety for me, ending in such an overwhelming grief that I have hardly power left to reproach myself, as perhaps I ought, for not having managed to see you before you left Leigh ; which I had fully intended to do. I make the first effort I am capable of to write to you, and I trust the letter will reach you a sufficiently long time before your approaching marriage to give you the time you will want for the consideration of its contents. Nothing I can now say, will avail to lessen your right to reproach me for having kept the intelligence I have to give so long from you ; I must bear your blame without any hope of forgiveness. The dead you will not reproach or blame, and so I will tell you at once that my beloved sister, Christabel Anstice, died in my arms yesterday

evening, after having a few hours before given birth to a son, who is the posthumous child of your cousin Ralph, to whom she was privately married in the April of this year. The child is living, and, as far as we can judge at present, likely to live. My sister has left in writing full particulars of her marriage, and an explanation which I trust you will think sufficient, of her motives for continuing to conceal it after her husband's death. This, and other papers in connection with her affairs, I shall be ready to place in your hands whenever you shall ask for them. My sister learned from her husband to trust you utterly, and in this faith, supported by my own knowledge of your character, I fearlessly confide my little nephew's interest to you. He has no friends in the world but you and me. My sister expressed a last wish to be buried near her husband. I do not urge the request, as it may be out of your power to grant it on so short a notice. I leave it with you, feeling sure that you will do what you can to help me.

“Yours sincerely,

“KATHERINE MOORE.”

The sunshine had left the side of the hill, and there was barely light enough to make out the words, when Wynyard finished reading the last of his letters; but it

was still a long time before he bethought himself of leaving his seat upon the fir-stump, and beginning his walk back to the château. He was not thinking actively all this time, nor even feeling very vividly; his prevailing sensation was that of one who, fancying himself other than he is, comes back to the sober realities of everyday life, and turns with relish to substance after so much shadow. Eight months—or was it only an hour? Was he like the barber in the Arabian Nights who dipped his head into a basin of water, and lifted it out again to find that in the interval he had lived through a year of sultan life, and was a barber again? As Wynyard sat looking down from the summit of the firwood, over the valley of La Roquette spread out far down beneath his feet, he could almost have believed something of the kind, and relegated all the events that had befallen him, since he last climbed the brow of the hill from the ravine, to the phantasmagoria of an uneasy dream. He had never really been what he seemed, never really owned any of the possessions that he fancied were his—Alma's heart no more than anything else; it had all been an unreality, all a mistake together. He found, to his surprise, that he could just then bear to let the shadows go, with astonishingly little pain. The station and wealth that he had called his own half an hour ago, had not taken

any very strong hold on him during the short time he had enjoyed them; they had always seemed more or less alien to his true life; and he had even occasionally looked back with regret to the self-chosen career on which he had once entered with such high hopes, and such a joyful sense of independence. As for the promised wife who had come to him with the rank and wealth—he had suffered so much a few minutes ago from the thought of marrying her, while the discovery of the deceit was rankling in his mind, that the prospect of release from an engagement entered into on false pretences, could only appear in the light of a reprieve from misery, to both of them. As long as he could give Alma what she had longed for, he would have felt bound to keep his word to her. He had loved her deeply once, however thoroughly he, just now, felt disabused of his love, and he would not have disappointed her and shamed her before the world, while he could give what she valued so highly as to sell her truth for it. But now that all the glamour had vanished like a puff of wind, what injustice could there be in reclaiming what she had never truly taken, what she had once turned away from, with indifference, if not with contempt.

It was well, Wynyard thought, that the path before him was so plain; if he had learned nothing of the news

contained in Ralph's and Katherine Moore's letters, how his heart would have bled for Alma to-night. He would have known even so, that the collapse of his greatness would have been a severer blow to her than to himself, but he would not on that account have given her up.

The burden of decision would then have remained with her; she would have had to make up her mind whether to marry him in his changed circumstances, or to bear the onus of breaking an engagement a few days before marriage. Wynyard did not for a moment doubt which way her true wishes would turn, or that if, swayed by considerations of the moment, she had married him, the result would have been an unhappy one, a life of discontent, possibly of bitterness, for them both. It was well that he had it in his power to save her and himself from such a contingency; to tell her that he was aware of the false assumption under which the engagement had been entered upon, and that since she had accepted an earl, he held her free from any tie to Wynyard Anstice.

So far, the immediate future was a little plainer than it might have been; yet how he wished those eight months really had been dream months, that he could wake up and find himself situated precisely as he had been on that soft summer evening, when the scent of the May roses and the orange-blossoms had filled the air, and

Emmie West's eyes had betrayed to him her confiding innocent love.

A growing chill in the air roused him at last to a perception of the length of time he had spent in these musings. The last rose-tint had passed from the mountains, and all the valleys lay in deep shadow when he began his walk home, and with the renewed energy that came with motion, came also a keener sense of pain, a more vivid realisation of all that was involved for himself and others in the news he had just learned. No, the situation, as it was eight months ago, was far from being restored. Poor Ralph! poor Christabel Moore! whose pale face dawned back upon his memory, sweet and wan, like the crescent moon beginning to show a wintry splendour in the sky; poor Christabel Anstice, who had slipped away without giving him an opportunity of fulfilling her husband's last request in her favour! Might not her fate have been different, if she had known of that letter which ought to have reached him eight months ago? It would certainly have been different with him, he would have escaped much mortification and embarrassment in the career on which he was now thrown back, and which he certainly should not be able to take up, at the point where he had left it. Above all, he would not have had the galling sense of having been

deceived and made a dupe of, which would always embitter his memory and rankle in his mind. It was hard to forgive, even though it was Christmas Day, and the fête lights were only now being put out on the altars of the little church below, and the canticles he had heard in the morning, "Goodwill and peace," "Peace and goodwill," kept striving to make themselves heard through the angry tumult of his thoughts. Eight months ago he had suffered, indeed, he had been disenchanted of first hopes and first love, but not beyond power of renewal; there had still been breaths of spring to which his heart could open. He had then been free, at least, from the deep distrust of others and the self-contempt that threatened him now.

The bank covered with cactus-leaves, jagged and flowerless, with the bare pomegranate-hedge above, caught his eye as he passed, and brought a stinging recollection of the early desolate days, when it had first photographed itself on his memory. All the discontents and disappointments of his life rose up and threatened to overwhelm him with bitterness in that dark hour. If Emmie had suffered she was avenged. Then came back a recollection of the look of victory and peace on her face which he felt put her as far above him as Alma had sunk below, in his esteem. His eyes were opened, but only to

his own discomfiture, and to a sense of loss and shame, which looked as if it would be endless. Yes, it was hard to forgive; it was winter in the landscape and winter in his heart, as he strode down the hill and through the silent village to the magnolia terrace, where the trees looked dark and almost funereal in the faint moonlight.

It was not till he was close upon home that he remembered the cairngorm brooch, which he ought to have given to Madame Antoine Barbou, that afternoon, and if there had been any hope of finding the good people of the valley awake at that hour, he would willingly have retraced his steps the whole way, to remedy his forgetfulness, so distasteful did the idea of going indoors and facing Madame de Florimel appear to him at the moment.

CHAPTER XIV.

FAREWELL.

Farewell! a long farewell to all my greatness.

Take, O take those lips away
That so sweetly were forsworn,
And those eyes, the break of day,
Lights that do mislead the morn :
But my kisses bring again,
Bring again—
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain,
Seal'd in vain!

MADAME DE FLORIMEL was accustomed to make something of a ceremony of her Christmas dinner, even when she had to eat it alone, and the prospect of sharing it this year with an English guest and a relation, had given zest to her preparations. The turkey, fattened under her own directions, the plum-pudding concocted under her own eyes, the relics of family plate from the old mansion at Leigh, which had accompanied her to La Roquette, and been aired only on great occasions since—all had been duly ordered and arranged, and madame's anxiety for Wynyard's return arose as much from care for the well-being of the dinner, as from curiosity about the cause of

his long absence. When he made his appearance at last, and she saw by her first glance at his face that whatever might be the news he had to tell, it was something that had moved him deeply and would require a great deal of talking about, she was ready to fall in with his suggestion that they should adjourn to the dining-room at once, and eat their meal in peace, before any questions were asked. As the dinner went on, Wynyard fell more and more kindly into the spirit of the entertainment. Madame de Florimel had too much tact to make any allusion to his own affairs, and the talk about hers in which he forced himself to take part—the praises of Joseph Marie, the village gossip, the little everyday incidents of the quiet routine life which she found sufficient for her happiness, made precisely the sort of talk that was most soothing at the moment, and helped him, better than anything else could have done, to struggle out of the bitter mood into which he had fallen. Here was someone whose life had been marred by deeper disappointments and infidelities than he had experienced, and who had contrived to keep a fresh, youthful heart and kindly faith through all. Here was the evidence of victory over pain, of sweet drawn from bitter, that ought to shame a fainting heart into courage. So, at least, Wynyard felt, looking across the dinner-table in the shabby, half-

furnished *salle à manger*, towards Madame de Florimel's spirited old face, as she held up her glass to him and drank goodwill and prosperity to her neighbours, to their olive-grounds, and vineyards, and poultry-yards, in a bumper of her own wine.

When they returned to the salon, Wynyard put a fresh log on the fire, drew madame's chair in front of it, and taking his seat beside her began cheerfully enough: "Well, madame, let us hope your lawyer, whoever he may be, is skilful enough to make successive alterations in your will, without leaving it a trap for future litigation, for I believe you will have to add a new clause, rescinding your late disposition of *Terres Blanches*, and returning to your first intention after all. That, at least, is what I think will be the effect on you, of the news *La Fermière* turned out of her cork drawer this afternoon."

Madame de Florimel took a long considering look in his face before she spoke. "So," she said slowly, at last, "that is it, then. Ralph is not dead, and has sent news of himself after all. I have had conjectures of the sort all along, and never been able to feel that you, my poor Wynyard, were really Lord Anstice. A disappearance of a year or two, and a sudden return, would be just what one might have expected of Ralph, the sort of practical joke he would like to play upon us all."

“No, no, nothing so dramatic; you forget that the letter was eight months old; nothing so good as dear old Ralph’s coming back, only a miserable little posthumous heir, who will keep us all in suspense and anxiety for the next twenty-one years, and never be worth half as much as his father after all. Not so pleasant at all events. There, read Ralph’s letter first, and then this one, and tell me what you think of it.”

Madame de Florimel interspersed her reading with many half-articulate exclamations of surprise, pity, and indignation, but when she had finished, she refolded the sheets, and, returning them to Wynyard in silence, sat looking at the fire, for once too much overwhelmed with disappointment to express it with her usual volubility.

Wynyard laid his hand over the soft finely-wrinkled fingers that lay, half-hidden by her lace-mittens, on her knee, and said: “Cheer up, madame, things are not so bad as might be, when one comes to look at them. There will be a long minority, remember, and you are the nearest, no, the only female relation on our side. You will have to come to England and educate that baby; and only consider the good you and Joseph Marie might do, during twenty-one years’ reign at Leigh! The secrets of husbandry and management you will impart to the ignorant tenant-farmers on the estate and their still more ignorant wives—it will be something to live for.”

“Wynyard, don’t!”

“My dear madame, you must do me the justice not to be too compassionate over me. If two experiences of the changes in public favour that follow such marked vicissitudes of fortune, don’t embitter me into a misanthrope, I really think I ought to be a great man.”

“I was not thinking of you; you would not let me congratulate you, and I am not going to condole with you. It is not as if Leigh had remained just as I knew it, before it was vulgarised by my poor cousin’s wealth, and the habits and tastes he brought there with him, from his old associations. I have never coveted the position, as he had made it for you. You, by yourself, will do quite as well, and be of as much real consequence in the world, with *Terres Blanches*. But—poor Miss Rivers!”

Wynyard winced, and a bitter smile came on his face.

“Yes; you do well to pity her; you understand her well, I see, better than I did. She is to be pitied, since a chance of being made a countess does not come, even to such a beauty as Miss Rivers, every day. Yet there is some consolation for her too, in the way things have fallen out; the news might have come a week after, instead of a week before, the wedding; and, as it is, the game will not be altogether up for her. She must resign

Leigh, since its present possessor is only a week old; but there are other fine places in the world, and I have no doubt, if she goes the right way to work, she will have Mr. Horace Kirkman, with Golden Mount in his gift, at her feet again, long before another year is out."

Madame de Florimel turned from the fire to look him full in the face; and, as he met her keen inquiring eyes, he felt sorry for the bitterness with which he had spoken. He had not meant to betray his discovery of Alma's purpose in hiding the letters to anyone, least of all to Madame de Florimel, who was sure to be eager enough in following out any hints to her disparagement, and already had the clue in her hand. While he sat thinking what he could say to soften the effect of his hasty outburst, Madame de Florimel showed him that his remorse was needless, since her surprise was caused by nothing else than finding him as well informed as herself. She got up, took a little slip of paper from the ledge on the high carved mantelshelf, where it had been carefully deposited, unfolded it, and held it before his eyes.

"I have been hesitating all this afternoon whether to show you this or not; but now I have no doubt that you had better read and have your eyes opened. It is the half-sheet of note-paper that was found with the letters in the cork drawer. You are too quick to miss its meaning,

so I will spare you my comments,—read and understand, that I may not be obliged to put into words what it has told me.”

“I should so like one of us to be quite happy.

“Your affectionate sister,

“CONSTANCE FORREST.”

Wynyard read the sentence on the paper aloud, with a sob in his voice. Madame de Florimel drew her chair a little closer to him.

“Quite happy,” she said; “that is rich, and a countess, with a man for whom she could feel a degree of affection, on other accounts. Wynyard, don’t be too sorry that you cannot give her the perfect happiness she looked for, when she accepted you. It would not have lasted, believe me, even for her, and I cannot imagine you even tolerably content in a marriage entered into with such views. You would have found out which part of the bargain was held of most account by your wife, sooner or later, and—you are an Anstice like myself—don’t I know how hard it would have gone with you; better live alone, if indeed there should be any necessity for living alone, than with someone you are continually tempted to despise!”

“A million times better,” Wynyard answered. “Don’t be afraid, madame, we are quite in accord about what has to be done. There will be no wedding for me on New Year’s Day. I had made up my mind about that before I left the pine wood above Terres Blanches this afternoon. No; do not take the tell-tale paper out of my hand; it is neither yours nor mine. I shall restore it to its rightful owner to-morrow, and let it once more tell its own story. It will again save words that had better not be spoken.”

“You must not see her, Wynyard; take my advice as you would a mother’s. I have had sorrowful experience enough in my life, and have learnt this one thing at least, that when two people who have loved each other are finally disenchanted, there is nothing so effectual to intensify their pain as meeting to talk about it. If, as is often the case, a good deal of surface emotion is called forth, and a kind of reconciliation patched up, which yet can never put things on the old footing, what is that, but a miserable lengthening out of the struggle, and an intensification of bitterness in the final rupture when it comes? On the other hand, if you confront each other only to show how hopelessly the old love is dead, you have given a stab to past recollections, that you will regret more and more as years pass on. Believe one who

has suffered from such interviews, and spare yourself and her all you can. Write to her instead of meeting her at San Remo to-morrow, and enclose the letters that have lain so long in Madame Dallon's bureau-drawer. Miss Rivers must surely sometimes have had a little curiosity about them, since she put them away there. She deserves to have it satisfied after eight months of suspense."

"Don't be sarcastic, madame, it does not become you, after all those good wishes to your neighbours on Christmas evening. Yes, you are right—we shall not meet—I will send her the letters with this strip of paper between them, just as Madame Dallon gave them to me. An hour or two ago I felt as if I should like to confront and shame her; but now—*pax*!—it is enough, there is sufficient mortification before her without that. I will go back to Leigh, and see if there is yet time to arrange for poor little Countess Anstice to have her last wish, and lie in our dreary mausoleum beside her husband of a month. That's about the only thing I can do to fulfil poor Ralph's request, and it will be well to begin at once, by putting things on a right footing; so you see it will be a funeral instead of a wedding that we Anstices shall begin the year with. Our white days are not to be yet; let us talk about other people's white days. Was it Bertrand *fils* or Merle *père*, who you said was going to buy that little

piece of ground of me below the bosquet, and build a maisonnette upon it?"

They tried, both of them, to bring the conversation back to La Roquette interests, and to discuss them as earnestly as they had done a little while ago; but the effort was too great, their hearts were too full, and by degrees the talk glided into more natural channels: the changed aspect of affairs at Leigh; Wynyard's own prospects in the future; the young, dead mother, whom Wynyard, in obedience to Ralph's last wish, tried hard to defend against Madame de Florimel's indignation; the baby-heir and his aunt, whose letter, on second perusal, Madame de Florimel approved, and whom she already began to look upon with interest, as joint guardian and educator, with herself, of the future head of the house of Anstice. The well-built-up logs of the wood fire blazed and fell apart, and smouldered into white ashes, while these topics followed one another, till at last the Louis Quatorze clock on the chimney-piece chimed an hour that quite startled and scandalised Madame de Florimel. Its midnight chimes had probably not been heard previously by mortal ears for a generation back.

CHAPTER XV.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

Was sucht ihr, mächtig und gelind,
Ihr Himmelstone, mich am Staube?
Klingt dort umher, wo weiche Menschen sind,
Die Botschaft hör' ich wohl, allein mir fehlt die glaube.

“Is that really the bridal wreath that Madame Elise sent for you to wear in September, Alma? I should not have thought it possible that lying by, carefully packed in a box for three months, could have made it look so *passée*, and the lace puffings on the dress—— Ward may say what she likes, but I can't help suspecting that trimmings are worn a shade higher now. Turn round again, Alma, and let me look at you from the other side.”

Lady Rivers was lying on a couch before a wood fire, in her dressing-room, at San Remo, and Alma stood before her, crowned and veiled, with the light of two lamps judiciously disposed on opposite stands, falling on the dazzling white folds of her bridal dress.

Ward, who had just disinterred the wedding paraphernalia from a box, where she had bestowed them the day when the news of Frank's death had arrived, was kneeling at Alma's feet, drawing out the long train and the lace puffings, in an anxious effort to smooth away some creases that disgraced her skill as a packer; and two or three of the women-servants of the hotel, who had scented the trying-on of bridal finery, were standing near the door, holding up their hands in admiration of the stately effect made by Alma's tall, white-robed figure and veiled head, as seen from behind. The face was turned towards her mother's couch, and, to judge by its effect on Lady Rivers, could not have been so satisfactory.

"It's very distressing," that lady resumed, after a lengthened gaze, "and I'm sure I don't know what to do. When Mrs. Stanar's daughter went out to be married in India, and took her wedding dress with her, I condoled with her mother on the mortification she must feel at the idea of her daughter being married in a dress that had been turned out of the milliner's hands three months before, but I little thought then of experiencing a similar inconvenience in my own family. I really can't compliment you, Alma; I don't know whether it's the wreath or the height of the trimmings, but there is a

something, a want of freshness in the general effect, that disappoints me sadly."

"Let us hope that Lord Anstice will not be so critical," Alma answered, in a somewhat weary tone. "I doubt whether he will notice it; freshness is, perhaps, hardly the effect he will look for in me, at my wedding."

"What nonsense, Alma, as if a waiting of three months would make any difference in you, at your age. I can't think what has made you take to saying such self-depreciatory things. If the season were a little further advanced, now, if it were February instead of December, we might have made you a wreath of real orange-blossom, and looped up the lace in front with sprays of natural flowers, just to give a different character to the dress. I hate going back to old things."

"I don't think you are singular there, mamma," said Alma; "a great many people find it unsatisfactory I fancy. I begin to doubt whether it ever answers. However, I hardly think that waiting till February for the real orange-blossom would answer in my case."

"We might get the blossoms even now, if we took a little pains about it," Lady Rivers continued, in a ruminating tone, without noticing Alma's interruption. "I remember Emmie West talked of making a natural wreath for a girl at La Roquette, who was going to be

married, and I can't help thinking that one of the kind would suit you better than that crushed artificial thing of Madame Elise's. You don't know how large and fine the sprays of orange-blossom are, one can get here."

Yes, Alma did know. As her mother spoke, the exact shape and size of a spray of orange-blossom came back to her memory. She saw it lying in the sunshine, on the garden-path of La Roquette, and herself coming down the steps from the maisonnette, picking it up and inhaling its fragrance, while the *facteur* was still on his way down the road, his letter-bag on his back; the spray that Emmie West was to have worn, if Uncle West had not died so opportunely, and she had not come to La Roquette just in time to stand on those steps and take in the letters on that particular morning. She had never voluntarily inhaled the scent of orange-flowers since. Wynyard would give her a bouquet of them next week, but she need not keep it in her hand more than a few minutes, or multiply the odour about her person more than could be helped.

"No, no," she said impatiently, "real flowers never do suit me, they always die directly I put them on. I am too artificial a person for anything but Madame Elise's performances. Ward and I will try to remodel

this one so as to satisfy you before the day comes, if it does come."

"Of course it will come, next week. You had a telegram from Paris to announce Wynyard's arrival there, and he will be at La Roquette to-night. What can you mean, Alma?"

"Not much, perhaps," said Alma, "only that I am tired of standing up in my finery, between the lamps and the wood fire. I am sorry you don't like me, mother," she added in a softer tone, stooping down towards the couch to kiss Lady Rivers's hectic cheek; "I hoped I was giving you a pleasure on Christmas Eve by consenting to be dressed up for you to see."

Lady Rivers's face took a piteous expression, and she threw her arms round her daughter and clung to her with a caressing, dependent clasp, such as Alma had never known from her before. "Oh, my dear, I know I ought to be satisfied," she whispered, sobbing, "I know it ought to be a proud day, and a happy one, to me, when I see you dressed up for such a marriage as you are going to make. If anyone had told me, a year ago, that things would end for you as they are ending, that you would marry a man we can all of us like, your father and all, who was also as rich and in as good a position as Wynyard is now, I should have looked forward to it

as a great triumph, a great happiness. Oh, Alma, is it not hard on me that I can't be happy to-day, that events should have fallen out to shake me so and make me feel so nervous, that I can't look forward to your wedding, and feel proud and happy about it, even when you stand before me in your bride's dress? Don't start away from me, Alma, and leave me just when, for once, I want you to comfort me."

"I'm only going to send Ward to the next room," Alma answered; "let me go for one minute, mamma, and I will come back to you."

She knew the sort of talk she had to expect, and she was glad of a minute's respite, to steady her nerves and steel her heart against the pain it would give her.

Lady Rivers was wiping away a few tears when Alma returned.

"It makes life such a very perplexing thing," she began, "that one can't look forward and see a little what is going to happen; one would sometimes act so very differently if one could foresee. This time last year, for example, when Mrs. Kirkman first spoke to me about Horace and you, if I could but have known that, before Christmas came round again, Wynyard would be an earl, and owner of the great Leigh estate, what a difference it would have made in my feelings. That brings me to the

question I want to ask you, Alma. When Wynyard was with us in London, after we heard of poor Frank's death, he was so kind to me that I used to think sometimes he could never have noticed the little slights——you know what I mean, Alma—the time when my duty to you obliged me to keep him at a distance, and perhaps to be a little inhospitable and rude sometimes. Do you know what he feels about all that now? Do you suppose he remembers it and thinks about it still?”

“He will never show that he thinks about it, you may depend upon that, mamma,” said Alma, in a hard voice; “he will always be very kind to all of us, whatever he thinks.”

“And that is the great thing,” answered Lady Rivers, reassured. “I should not like to have another son-in-law who fancied he had a grudge against me, or to see another of my daughters afraid of her husband. Wynyard is your own choice, Alma, the man you have always loved; you can never cast it in my teeth that I persuaded you to take him, as poor Constance does, most unjustly, in speaking of Sir John. Of course it would have been as well if we could have always kept on friendly terms with him; but, after all, Wynyard is a sensible man, your father says so, and he will perhaps not blame me in his heart for not treating him as if

he were a desirable match at a time when he was most undesirable. He will understand my conduct."

"Yes, he understands it."

"I am aware that all men over-value themselves, but he cannot think so highly of himself, can he, as to expect a mother who has her daughter's true interest at heart, to feel towards him while he was a poor barrister as she would naturally feel when his fortune changed? You might put it to him in that light if he should ever speak to you, Alma, on the subject of my past treatment of him."

"But he never will speak on that subject to me, mamma."

"Ah! but you don't know, my dear. If there is anything unpleasant a man can bring up to his wife after they are married, he is nearly sure, sooner or later, to find occasion to do it; and so, as I said before, I wish we could have foreseen what was to happen. People one thought one had got rid of, do seem to have such a knack of turning up again when one can least put up with them."

"Yes, mamma."

"You know what I am thinking of, Alma; you don't like me to refer to it, but I shall have no one to talk to when you are gone; and oh! my dear, I don't think I

ever shall be able quite to put out of my mind the shock I felt at Monaco when we went to look at the gambling, and Horace Kirkman suddenly started up from the table at which Constance and young Lawrence had just sat down; the contemptuous way in which he pushed through our party, and the look he gave you in going out—quite savage. Whatever you say, I shall always believe that it was, somehow or other, through him those wicked reports reached Sir John, that made him forbid poor Constance to stay on with us here, till after your wedding.”

“There is so little likelihood of the two coming across each other now.”

“You don’t know that, Alma. The Kirkmans are making their way everywhere, and are being taken up by all sorts of people—the very best. They are not refined, I never thought they were. I have more discernment than to think so, but then they are immensely wealthy, and it tells, you see, with the very best people. We were, perhaps, early in the field, but, looking at things as they were a year ago, I really can’t see that we did anything wrong, however much I may regret that I did not foresee what was going to happen to Wynyard Anstice.”

Alma was silent; it seemed useless to begin pointing out the discrepancies between these regrets and any view

of the subject that Wynyard might be supposed to take. Indeed, what could she say to her mother that would not still more forcibly hit herself, and she thought she did not need to put the deeper causes for regret into words, to make herself feel them. Luckily Ward was impatient to begin the business of taking off and refolding the wedding-dress, and now put her head out of the inner room to remark that the hour for the table d'hôte was close at hand, and that there was hardly time left for Miss Rivers to change her dress before Sir Francis would come to take her down to dinner.

It was late when Alma came upstairs again. Lady Rivers had gone to bed and was asleep, and as Sir Francis had fallen in with a congenial companion below, she had their sitting-room to herself for the rest of the evening—a lonely Christmas Eve, in sharp contrast with past Christmas Eves, and with the way in which other people were passing the season. Yet there was nothing in such solitude that should have depressed a happy bride-elect, with a telegram in her possession to say that her bridegroom was on his way to join her, and would be with her the day after to-morrow. Alma chided herself for her gloom, and then took up Wynyard's last letter, written from Longhurst, and read it over again, while a

soft wind, blowing through the open window, brought in the scent of the climbing roses round the balcony, and made the light of her lamp flicker on the page. These surroundings made her feel very remote from Longhurst, with its chilly dark rooms and windy avenues, as Wynyard described them; remote in feeling, too, from him, when, in reading on and on, she caught the tone that coloured his descriptions and ran through all his thoughts about the place—such tender, regretful looking back to past days, so much dwelling, with anxious loyalty, on the old links between them; it was hardly being loved at all, Alma told herself bitterly, to owe all her lover's tenderness to recollections of the past. One could not live on past devotion any more than one could be warmed by last year's sunshine. And the case was so different with herself. There had been coldness, there had been pain since their reunion, but her love had been growing amid all the pain, gradually changing its character and its standpoint, through the self-humiliation that the knowledge of her fault had brought upon her. She had altogether abandoned the critical attitude, in which she had half distrusted, half admired, all in him that was higher in conduct, or in thought than the standard to which she had been accustomed; but could she ever let him see

this? Could she show him how her love had deepened and strengthened, while the depressing persuasion grew upon her that she was lessened in his estimation, that his old tenderness was chilled into something hardly warmer than indulgent pity and regret for what had been? It was hard, Alma thought, to have lost so much just when she seemed to have gained all; but men—or fate was it—did seem to be very hard on any vacillation or doubtfulness. Was it any use to go back and try to take up a love you had once chilled or wounded? Was complete forgiveness, complete healing possible? Did you not most often, when you tried to take it back again, find it dead or changed into something unfamiliar—something in which, perhaps, all the old worth was transmuted into evil? Then her thoughts flew off to Constance, for whose fate her heart was now always aching. How lightly she had thrown away her early love, and now how the longing to be loved was revenging itself upon her; now when the love, once so innocent and tender, had turned into a terror, a guilt that yet had a fascination for her, from which her better self and the entreaties of her friends had hardly power to drag her back. What a struggle it had been and might again be! A struggle in which victory could only partially restore self-respect. Alma groaned in

spirit, recalling looks, and words, and tones of voice that must always, she thought, dwell in Constance's memory, like a blot, or a stain, growing darker and more painful to look upon, in proportion as her vision cleared through repentance, and her sense of duty grew stronger. How was it that Constance did not perceive the different quality of the love which haunted her now that there was no longer respect, or tenderness, or even pity in it, that it was but the dark shadow of what she had cast from her when it was worth having. Ah! was it possible for slighted love to come back whole-hearted and pure, with the aura of tender, ideal worship, that had breathed about it before its trust had been betrayed, its divinity dragged in the dust? Was there ever, under the best circumstances, any use in going back?

It was not the first time that Alma had wasted minutes and hours in questions and misgivings like these. The habit had grown upon her since Constance's visit, and to-night, with Wynyard's letter from Longhurst in her hand, and the knowledge that he was now on his way to La Roquette in her mind, they came with fresh force and claimed the solitary hours as all their own. She had almost forgotten that it was Christmas Eve, till in the midst of her bitter musings the sound of bells chiming from the churches in the town reached her through the

open window, and she recalled the talk there had been at the table d'hôte that day about the midnight services that were to take place to-night.

Alma had refused to go to one ; when someone asked her, she did not like the thought of making a spectacle of a service because it was in a foreign church, but now a great yearning to be one among the crowds approaching the lighted altars came over her. If she could have gone unknown and lost herself among a crowd of poor people, who were coming with simple-hearted believing joy, to welcome the birth into the world of *that* love which, continually slighted, forgives continually, and offers from its very wounds, healing for its outrages ; if she could have caught the contagion of their hope, by kneeling with them and forgetting herself for a little while, what a rest it would have been !

Then, moved by an impulse such as she had never experienced before, Alma sank on her knees by the chair on which she had been sitting and hid her face, weeping. The midnight chimes reached her ears as she knelt, and by-and-by the tolling of a bell in a near church, that told that the central moment of the service had come, and that everywhere throughout France, throughout Christendom, heads were bowed and hearts lifted up in joyful yearning. Oh ! to feel it for a

moment ; yes, there was such a love, if only her doubting heart could turn to it and find rest. The love that, slighted, comes near and offers itself still, that stands at the door and knocks until eventide, that can cover a multitude of sins against itself, and remember them no more.

For the first time in her life Alma saw it as the supreme good ; her soul rose for a little while out of the mists of doubt and worldliness, and, in the light that came to her then, she saw, as she had never seen before, the nature of her errors, and knew against Whom she had sinned, when she had paltered with her own heart and other hearts for the sake of wealth and worldly ambition. She recalled the expression of Horace Kirkman's face at their last unexpected meeting, and felt utterly self-condemned. Had she, by her selfish conduct towards him, robbed him of the one chance of rising to better things which a sincere love might have brought him ? If all his future career were marked by self-seeking, and he never again knew anything of love but its most selfish instincts, would not she be answerable for this, who had disabused him of any dawning ideal of disinterestedness and purity which he might have associated with the object of his first love ? Could there be a future of honour and love and heart satisfaction for her who had wrought this ?

For a moment or two Alma was ready to pronounce

against herself, and almost to wish that something might come to snatch from her the fruits of her wrong doing, for just then no doom seemed so dreadful as the being left to possess them. It was but a momentary impulse, and her lips refused to translate it into the words of prayer that half rose in her mind; her ordinary mood returned even while she knelt, yet the better thought had been there, a ray of divine light had pierced the clouds of her self-will, and an infinite help and comfort lay for her in that recollection, in after times.

CHAPTER XVI.

SERO SED SERIO.

Never any more
While I live
Can I hope to see his face, as before.

SIR FRANCIS had to all appearance quite recovered the shock of his son's death by the time he rejoined his family at San Remo; he had resumed all his old habits, during three months of full occupation in London, where he had been living by himself, and he was now as ready as he had ever been, in holiday times, to fight over again his old battles, legal or political, with anyone he fell in with, who was inclined for such mental exercise. He never spoke Frank's name now, either to his wife or to Alma, or alluded to the sorrow that, three months ago, had appeared to overwhelm him.

Perhaps Lady Rivers might have noticed, if it had been her way to notice what could not be complained of, that he listened more patiently than formerly to her talk

about her own health, and indulged in fewer sarcastic remarks at her expense. Alma, at all events, observed a difference in her father before he had been with them twenty-four hours. He talked as energetically as was his wont, and seemed as entirely absorbed in business interests; but she saw that there was more of effort in the energy and absorption than there used to be; it was a determined will, not a craving intellect, that now kept him busy, and, whenever he allowed himself to remit his exertions for awhile, the eager light in his face died out into a weary greyness that made him look many years older than he had done a few months ago. Alma's heart was very much moved towards her father when she noticed this change, for she admired his resolution to get what solace and spiritual nourishment he could, from his old sources of interest, and felt how much more sympathy she had with this attitude of mind, than with her mother's constant complaining.

She spent a great part of Christmas Day with her father, who, now that the parting was so near, seemed disposed to take her into a closer companionship than any one of his children had hitherto enjoyed. They went to church together in the morning, and in the afternoon had a long solitary walk on the shore, while the level golden light lay over the sea, and the waves

broke on their unchanging shore-line with gentle ripples that matched the mild air and the bright lines of the gardens overhanging the beach. The contrast between this and other Christmas afternoon walks at Longhurst was strong in their minds, but there was a careful avoidance, on both sides, of painful subjects. Sir Francis talked with resolute cheerfulness on one topic of family interest after another; the advantages of having Longhurst off their hands, the tolerably good appointment secured for Melville, the leisure which his solitude this winter afforded for taking up some long-abandoned studies, and his good luck in still feeling something of the charm these had had for him in early years, when he was a struggling man, and found study a refuge from pinching anxiety and the bitterness of deferred hopes; he was lucky indeed to be able to turn to them now with some remnant of the old zest—after all.

They were standing still watching the sunset when Sir Francis said this, and Alma, glancing at her father's face in a short silence that followed, saw again the grey weariness she had noticed before, overspreading it, and thoughts he did not utter, found an echo in her mind. After all—all his successes, all his triumphs, to be thankful above all things for the power of taking an interest still in the old relaxations; had his splendid career

brought him no greater satisfaction than that? "Ah! well," Sir Francis muttered, "it's a great thing to have such a resource to turn to, when one gets hipped; but how poor West used to sneer at me when we were young for giving my time to such unprofitable speculations! Poor fellow, he was full then of a very different sort of speculations, and a poor thing he made of them in the end. Not that I would crow over him, as having done so much better with my life than he with his, after all. Who knows? When one gets to the end, I suppose it all looks pretty much the same,—at least as to the more or less pudding and praise one has laid hold of. Poor West, he and I spent some pleasant days together when we were boys. I wish he had not grown so cantankerous with his reverses, or that your mother had managed matters so that our families need not have stood so far apart in later times. You must see what you can do for Emmie, Alma, when you are Countess Anstice. I don't like to think of that nice little thing wearing out her best days as nursery governess to one of the Kirkmans. You might have her to live with you at Leigh, by-and-by."

"She is very happy where she is, papa," said Alma, "she has written a very cheerful letter to mamma lately, which I will show you when we go in."

Emmie West's name did not sound very pleasantly to Alma's ears on that day, when she knew that Wynyard was at La Roquette in close proximity to the hidden letters, and surrounded by sights that must bring Emmie and the spring of his sojourn there to his memory. To-morrow the danger would be over, and Wynyard by her side, not to leave her again; and after that, Alma thought that she should feel quite generously towards Emmie, and not allow herself another jealous thought ever again. The time of suspense and danger was lessening minute by minute, even while these thoughts were rankling in her heart; there went the last rim of the sun below the purple mountains, and now there was nothing further to look for, but the lighting up of the red after-glow and its duskier reflection overspreading the darkening sea. Alma slipped her hand under her father's arm, and they climbed the steep path to the hotel in silence; but when they had reached their own suite of apartments, and Alma was about to leave him to take off her outdoor dress, Sir Francis surprised her very much by drawing her close to him, and giving her, what it was very much against his wont to bestow, an uncalled-for kiss.

"You are happy, are you not, my child?" he said, still holding her fast and looking wistfully in her face, "there is no drawback to your happiness? Nay, 'tis a

foolish question, but humour your father to-night; let me have it from your own lips that all is well with you, that you are following your own wishes with an assured prospect of content. I was negligent about Constance, and I cannot afford to make another mistake. Tell me it is only a girl's natural sorrow at bidding good-bye to her old life that makes you look so sad to-day. There is nothing else on your mind—no drawback or misgiving? I may be quite happy about you, my Alma, may I not?"

Oh! if she dared but have told him all, and given a pledge of future truthfulness by taking counsel with her father to-night; but it was too foreign to all old habits and family traditions to talk of feelings to him. She could not bring herself, all in a minute, to take such an unheard-of step, and while she hesitated, a distressed look came into her face, and she saw the answering disappointment in her father's; he bent and kissed her again, and then let go his hold on her hands.

"Well, my dear, never mind, I have only startled and distressed you I see; run away to your mother, and get ready for dinner."

Alma went into the inner suite of rooms to find Ward busied, under her mother's directions, in choosing the prettiest of her evening dresses for her to wear to-night.

There would be a larger party than usual at dinner this evening, and everyone would be looking at the young English bride-elect, who was to be made a countess in a day or two; it was time for her to throw off something of the plainness of attire that their period of mourning had imposed on her hitherto, and shine out in anticipation of the glory that was to be.

Strange to say, Alma's spirits and self-confidence rose under the business of dressing, and when she turned to the glass, before leaving the room, the radiant figure that looked out from its depths seemed to give her reassuring glances, and to chide her for her depression and her fears. The exhilaration carried her triumphantly through the rest of the evening, drowning anxiety, and restoring her charm of manner and that happy consciousness of power to please, which had somewhat deserted her since she had had cause to be displeased with herself.

The company that night comprised some foreigners of rank and English visitors to San Remo, old acquaintance of the Riverses, who were interested in Alma's prospects, and glad to see her come out of the eclipse into which the gloom of the family bereavement had cast her of late. They gathered round her in the evening with congratulations and sympathetic curiosity about the ceremony fixed for New Year's Day, and for a few hours

while Wynyard and Madame de Florimel were having their lengthy talk over the dying firebrands in the salon at La Roquette, Alma's sceptre of power seemed to be given back to her, and she became once more the brilliant society queen, who had dazzled Mr. Kirkman into coveting her for a daughter-in-law, a year ago, at Golden Mount. Her father, seeing the homage paid to her, and observing the brilliancy of her smile and the light in her eyes, felt happy and satisfied in all that concerned her, pleasing himself with the thought that at least one of his children would profit by the position to which his hard work had raised them, and reward his labours by giving him the spectacle of a happy, prosperous life, in which his old age would have a share.

During *déjeûner* the next morning, Alma made an engagement to join a riding-party who had planned a distant excursion, and would not return to the hotel till a little before sunset. The early post had not brought her the note from Wynyard, fixing the hour of his arrival at San Remo, that she had hoped to receive, and she told herself that she should be able to meet him more easily and naturally, more as he would expect to be met, if she found him awaiting her on her return from her ride, than if she spent the long morning hours in looking out for him, and fretting herself with foolish conjectures.

about the cause of his detention at La Roquette, should he not appear at the earliest moment possible.

It was a gay party, and the ride in the exhilarating air had quite the effect Alma hoped in banishing anxious thoughts and making the hours fly swiftly. Then there were little delays, lingerings by some of the party to finish sketches at the place where they stopped for their mid-day rest, halts to watch the effects of changing lights and shadows on the snow-clad Alpine range in the distance, so that in spite of urgings from the more experienced members of the party, the sun set whilst they were still some miles from the town.

There could not possibly be any waiting for her now, Alma thought cheerfully, while the horses were urged to a brisk canter during the last half-hour. Suspense was virtually over; he would be there, most likely on the steps of the hotel, looking out for her. It would be the least formal greeting possible, for he would come forward to lift her from her horse, his arms would be round her before the glow of exercise had left her cheeks, and the thrill of joy would banish all misgivings, all self-questioning, all looking back, and make the future easy. While the rapid motion was bearing her joyfully nearer and nearer each minute to him, she would not allow herself to picture an expression on the face she should

look down upon, as his arms clasped her, that would not bring complete satisfaction to her heart.

There were figures on the hotel-steps which Alma could not distinguish at the moment of drawing up before the door, but it was her father who came forward to lift her down.

“You are late,” he said, “but no, don’t look so penitent, no one has been waiting in a state of feverish impatience for your return. I went down to meet the train you mentioned as most likely, and had my walk for nothing; however, I see there is a letter for you in the sitting-room, just arrived, which will no doubt explain the delay, and let you know when we may expect him.”

“A note, or a letter?” Alma could not help asking, as she crossed the hall with her father. Sir Francis smiled playfully.

“I should think a note would do since you will see him so soon, but so far as my observation, which was not scrutinising, went, I should say it was a thick letter; but run on, my dear, as you are so curious—don’t wait for me; stairs are nothing to you—run on to the salon.”

Alma carried off the letter to her own room, and let Ward take off her riding-habit and put her into her ordinary evening dress, before she ventured to do more than glance at the outside. She even put it out of her

hand, on the dressing-table, and would not, for those few minutes, allow herself to realise how thick it was, and that the envelope must almost certainly hold an enclosure. She always thought afterwards that she had not felt any surprise, but had known the worst of the news from the moment when her father told her there was a letter awaiting her; and yet this knowledge must certainly, somehow or other, have admitted hope, or else feeling was suspended for awhile, or she could not have spoken cheerfully to her mother through the open dressing-room door, and sent Ward away with a calm sentence when she had done with her.

At last she was alone—there was no further excuse for waiting; it must come, the sight that she now knew she had been expecting and dreading since May,—those letters, and whatever Wynyard might choose to say to her about them. Reasonably she knew of nothing that would connect her with them, or induce him to send them on to her, supposing him to have received them; it was only her conscience that spoke, and that so loudly that every other power of her mind was silenced. She could not think of probabilities; she knew that her punishment had come.

It was Wynyard's handwriting on the envelope, however, and before she broke the seal she raised the

letter softly, as she had done once before with one of his, and laid it against her lips,—once more before she knew for certain that he despised her. She had been used in old times, when looking at her name in his handwriting, to remember words he had spoken, long ago, foolish tender words, about how he felt while framing those letters—the spell they were to him—the thrills the sight of them called up, as they grew under his fingers. That *had* been, and she recalled it once more while the envelope touched her lips, and then she turned the letter round and broke the seal. She drew out two letters directed to Wynyard Anstice, Esq.; then a half-sheet of paper in Constance's handwriting, the sight of which gave her as keen a pain, as if the words which she read stupidly over and over again had been sharp instruments stabbing through her eyes and her brain to her heart; last came a letter from Wynyard to herself, which she opened after awhile, when an interval in her pain, a deadness stealing over her, gave her power to read.

“MY DEAR ALMA,

“You will naturally be very much surprised to get a letter from me to-day, instead of seeing me; but when you have read the two letters I herewith enclose, you will understand why, after much thought, I have determined

rather to write than to come to you. After all we had hoped and planned, there must needs have been great pain and bitterness in words of farewell, spoken between you and me, and you will agree, I am sure, after reading these letters, that nothing but to exchange such words remains to us, and that the least painful way of getting them said had better be chosen. Dear Alma, since it is a farewell I am writing, I will not say a word of reproach to you for keeping back my cousin Ralph Anstice's letter from me last spring; or for letting me suppose that you were ignorant of his death, when we had our explanation by the river at Clelles, and that I was misinformed about the relations that actually existed between you and Horace Kirkman. Thinking of you still with a lingering of my old belief about you, I feel almost ready to beg your pardon for knowing what I know, and I have a strange reluctance to sending you the slip of your sister's letter which has explained to me and Madame de Florimel the riddle of your concealment of my letters; yet, in justice to myself, I must let you know that I know all, and that if the letters I enclose had not contained the news they will in a few moments reveal to you, I should have found myself in a great dilemma, the dilemma of having to fulfil a promise made under a misconception of the circumstances

that called it forth. As it is, the man you accepted as your future husband, no more exists than ever did the Alma whom I, Wynyard Anstice, then believed had been true to me through my adversity, and loved me enough to brave a struggling life at my side. Your misconception was, as you will see, even more complete than mine, and I suppose—painful as the writing of this letter is to me, and, as the reading of it will I fear be to you—we ought both to be thankful that events have so fallen out, as to show us, before it was too late, the unreality on which we were building our hopes. Had the news contained in the letters I enclose reached us a week after, instead of a week before, our proposed marriage, you would have had the mortification of finding that you had been betrayed by your own act into accepting the fate you wished to avoid—marriage with a poor man (for my position after nearly a year's idleness will be much worse than it was when I wrote to you last January), and I should have had the still worse pain of witnessing your disappointment, and learning the little power I, personally, had to console you for the loss of the position you had coveted. It would not have been well for either of us. However painful our present circumstances may be, let us both be thankful that we have escaped a life of mutual recrimination and dis-

content. That last sentence, as I read it over, a quarter of an hour or so after writing, sounds bitter ; but believe me, dear Alma, I do not feel bitterly towards you, as I write the concluding sentences of my letter. Why should I ? After all, why should I ever have expected so much love from you, that you should abandon, for my sake, what you have been taught to think the good of life ? I have only my own folly and misunderstanding of your character to thank for my disappointment.

“ You judged yourself more truly. You are made for the bright things and the prosperous high places of the world ; and since I cannot give them to you myself, let me at least hope that they will come to you through someone who will love you as well as I could have done, and make you as happy as I would fain have made you. Dear Alma, farewell. I go back to Leigh to-morrow, to carry out a request you will read in Miss Moore’s letter, and I will write to your father fully from thence. Tell him as much or as little as you please of the circumstances which caused the delay of Ralph Anstice’s letter in reaching me. I shall of course be silent on that part of the matter so long as I live.

“ WYNYARD ANSTICE.”

The bewilderment caused by some sentences in this

letter befriended Alma, so far as to shield her from feeling at once all the pain it was calculated to give her. She turned breathlessly for explanation to the enclosed letters, and found a further relief in reading them. Just for the first few moments after their perusal she could comfort herself by thinking that all might not be over, that he was giving her up mainly on account of the change in his circumstances, not because he was angry with her, and despised her for what she had done. This faint hope buoyed her up for a while, enabled her to speak cheerfully to her father when he summoned her to go down to dinner, and sustained her through the hour when it was absolutely necessary to keep up appearances, but minute by minute she felt that the hope she had fastened upon was melting in her grasp, and the bitter waters of despair from which she strove to drag herself away, were nearing and nearing, and must sooner or later go over her head. It is never at the first moment that an unexpected misfortune is felt in its full force. All its aspects of pain and mortification cannot be taken in at one glance; they present themselves usually one by one, each showing itself as a fresh foe to strike down the incredulities, or hopes, or old habits of thought, that the mind, in self-defence, at first opposes as barriers to the rising flood of woe. So it was with Alma through that evening. She

found herself fighting point by point for one outpost of hope after another, from which she was ever driven back by a fresh aspect of the harm she had done, in keeping back the letters. At the end of her conflict she took a sudden resolution, without calculating the pain it would cost her to act upon it. She went to her father, as soon as she knew him to be alone, and told him the whole story, beginning with her reading of Constance's letter in Madame de Florimel's store-room, and ending by placing Wynyard's letters, with the two enclosures, in his hands.

"I shall read in his face," she thought, "what hope there is for me. He is a man, with a man's way of understanding and looking at things; not a woman's. I shall read in his face what measure of condemnation my conduct merits in his opinion, and what degree of forgiveness and further affection he could mete out to one who had so offended against his sense of honour. He is not so strict, perhaps, and has not such a high idea of what a woman should be, as Wynyard has, but if he speaks as if I could be forgiven and loved again, I will hope."

Sir Francis was a person to whom it was not difficult to tell a painful story, for he had a habit of attentive listening; and he never interposed, but with a question that helped the narrator in his progress to the end of his

confession. Neither were there any comments on what he heard, to be deciphered on his astute, listening face—no surprise or indignation—nothing but interest and anxiety to learn the exact truth was to be read there, till he had attained that end. This quiet, business-like manner of his carried Alma on, and caused her confession to be fuller than perhaps she could have made it to anyone else. She even spoke of her early doubts as to whether she could be happy with a man of so little worldly ambition as Wynyard, and confessed the coldness that had grown up between them since their engagement. When she ceased to speak there was a long pause, and Alma felt the arm which her father had put round her waist at the beginning of the interview slightly relax its hold; she heard a heavy sigh, and, looking up, saw that her father's head was turned away from her. He was thinking, now that he knew all, judging her, looking at everything all round, sorrowfully but quite calmly, weighing what excuses there might be, and summing up for or against her in his mind. When he spoke it would not be to reproach, or bitterly blame; it would be a calm sentence, but Alma felt it would have all her life's welfare in it, for it would be a verdict she would have no courage to appeal against. If her father found her conduct inexcusable, she would never go to any other man for

pardon for it; she could never have faith enough, or humility enough, for that. If Alma had known how much she would suffer during those moments of suspense, she would hardly have had courage to expose herself to such pain. Before her father spoke, she was ready to fall on her knees at his feet and beg him to break the silence, if only by an outburst of indignation against her. So terrible was it to her to watch the gradual settling of the lines of his face into hopelessness, and to hear repeated again and again the heavy sigh, which never came from him but when he was trying to bring his mind to contemplate a painful state of things for which he saw no remedy.

“You have told me everything?” he said at last.

“Yes, papa, everything. You think there is no hope for me?”

“I don’t know exactly what hope you would have. You have read the letters, you know the state of mind he is in, and his circumstances now. No, Alma, I see what you are going to ask, but I cannot conscientiously do it for you. If, while he loved you and esteemed you, as I am afraid he never can again, you doubted whether you could endure poverty for his sake, how much less would you find it endurable, when the love and trust that were to have stood in the place of riches have been

lessened by such an experience as this? It would not answer, my dear. You must trust me, and believe my experience. You have been brought up in a certain way, you have certain views and a certain character, and you can't, however much you may think it now, get rid of all that suddenly. If you were to marry Wynyard next week, as at this moment you wish to do, your former dislike to narrow circumstances—the differences between your views of life and his—would reappear in a little while. Even if you kept back the expression of them, there would always be the recollection of this thing between you to make him suspect you of ambition and discontent, and to make you divine suspicion in him whenever a difference of opinion cropped up. You don't believe this of yourself, but you see he does. It might easily come to be as he describes it—a life of mutual recrimination and discontent. You must not ask me to help you to such a lot as that, and you know your mother will not."

"If I were to tell him myself that, in spite of all, I had always loved him——?"

"But, my dear—I do not want to pain you, I am sorry enough for you, but the case is too serious for anything but perfect frankness—after what has passed—under the circumstances of your refusal and your

acceptance, I don't see how you can say that you have always loved him, expecting him to believe it. There are limits to the degree of vacillation a man can bear generously. You must believe me, Alma, there is nothing for you now but to accept his decision in silence. I know it is hard when one finds one has made a great mistake not to try to rectify it, but sometimes submission to blame and loss one has brought on oneself is all that is left to one; the only course that has any dignity in it."

Then Sir Francis put the arm he had withdrawn round Alma's waist again, drew her close to him, and kissed her. There was pitying kindness, fatherly protection, but not the old, proud love in his caress. Alma felt the difference down to the bottom of her proud heart, and it decided her conduct. If it was bitter to be caressed by a father who was disappointed in her, how could she bear the caresses of a husband in whose esteem she had been lessened, and before whom she must continually humble herself?

She did not withdraw from her father's pitying embrace; she crept even a little closer to him, telling herself that this love, this clasp was the best, the closest that remained to her, all at least that she had power to take, for when her father's voice ceased while she sat

silent with her head on his shoulder, another voice seemed to sound in her ear :

Life's light grows dim, let him never come back to us,
There would be doubt, hesitation, and pain.

She remembered the accents of Wynyard's voice as she had heard them in the sunshiny meadow at Clelles repeating these words, and they carried the conviction with them now, that she had forcibly put away from her then—it is the faithful heart that wins and keeps, but if one has not faith——

There had been a relenting in his tone whilst reading the last verse :

Pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne.

She remembered that also. Yes, there might come the peace of forgiveness and reconciliation sometime ; but for that she felt she must wait a weary while, and even that would not restore to her the love that she had lost.

“ You will bear it bravely,” Sir Francis said, kissing her again. “ I am glad you told me the whole truth, Alma. We will never refer to it again, my dear, even between ourselves. There is no need for anyone else to hear more than that the sudden change in Wynyard's circumstances makes it impossible for him to marry. I am glad you told *me* the whole truth. You are the first of my children who has come to me

frankly with the confession of a fault, and if it is any comfort to you to hear, my dear, I can tell you that the pleasure of having your confidence will go far to atone for the pain your story has caused me; I should have felt it keenly indeed had I heard it from any other than yourself." Then there was another and a warmer kiss, and at last Alma went away, more comforted by her father's kindness than she could have believed possible an hour ago. She had suffered so much during the last eight months from telling herself that the affection to which she was about to trust her whole life had been won on false pretences, and might collapse at any moment, that the certainty of possessing one love that had survived the knowledge of her fault, to which she could henceforth turn for full sympathy and understanding of her mental troubles and remorse, brought with it rest and peace that had in them a promise of healing.

The next day the Rivers family left the hotel at San Remo for Genoa without taking leave of any of their acquaintance. The wonder they left behind them grew more and more intense for a day or two, and then found its solution in paragraphs which began to appear in *Galignani*, copied from the London papers. The history of Lord Anstice's private marriage, and the birth of his

heir, had by this time become public property, and furnished, as might be expected, a nine days' wonder to the lovers of fashionable gossip, and afforded welcome incident to fill up vacant corners of evening papers. Some of these lengthened out the narrative with comments on the conduct of the actual possessor of the title and estate, in resigning his honours without any effort to resist the unexpected claim upon them, and even went so far as to give some particulars respecting the antecedents of the man who had borne the title of Lord Anstice during the last eight months; dwelling upon the cause of his quarrel with the old lord; his upright character, the promise of distinction which his short career at the bar and as a writer had held out; setting him forth, in fact, as the hero of a story which awakened a considerable amount of public interest and sympathy. Alma Rivers's name did not come into the public papers, to the great relief of her friends; but it was in everybody's mouth, as they read and talked, and much conjecture was bestowed on the course of conduct that might be expected from Lady Rivers's daughter under such trying circumstances. Would she set an example of romantic constancy, and marry her lover in spite of his downfall, or would she act worthily of her bringing up, and throw him over courageously, now that he had nothing to offer befitting her just claims?

Opinions were much divided on the subject ; some holding that Lady Rivers would never allow her favourite daughter to subside into a poor marriage, after all her ambitious hopes and schemes, and the boasting to which she had committed herself of late years. Others, whom Alma's charm had fascinated, maintained that the daughter had a will, and, it was averred, unlikely as such a supposition sounded, a heart of her own, capable of finding something lovable in a man, besides his fortune. The question served for discussion and conjecture for a longer time than such puzzles usually remain unsolved, for no authentic information was to be obtained from either of the sources who could have furnished it with authority.

Wynyard Anstice's old friends and acquaintance, when he reappeared among them, in his former character, found that his usual frankness deserted him, and that he became extremely impenetrable whenever any approach to a question respecting his present relations with Miss Rivers, was ventured upon by anyone. And when, later in the same season, Lady Rivers returned to London, in restored health, and the mother and daughter reappeared in their old circle, and resumed their long-interrupted round of gaieties, the most curious of those who had discussed Alma's fate did not venture to address any question to herself on the subject. Hers was not a beauty to fade

quickly, and she was as well received and as much admired as ever, perhaps a little more looked at and talked about, for the romantic story attached to her name, and that shadow of a nearly-acquired coronet which the imaginative among her acquaintance still saw hovering about her brow. A girl who had been within a week of becoming a countess could not fail to be regarded with a greater interest than attached to the generality of people.

Among the men of her acquaintance, there was more than one who felt a nearer interest than curiosity in the question as to whether or not her hand was free, and who would have endeavoured to put an end to the doubt, if the least opportunity for such a step had been given ; but though Alma took some pains to sustain her reputation as a wit and beauty, and to hold the position of a popular favourite, which she had long enjoyed, she never distinguished any of her admirers so far as to give him courage to approach her thus nearly. She remained an enigma to most people ; even those who thought they knew her well were puzzled to reconcile the energy with which she would at times throw herself into the amusement of the moment, and the keen interest in intellectual subjects her conversation always displayed, with a certain cold proud apathy, which was the prevailing expression

of her countenance. Yet, as time went on, even in the superficial society she frequented, there came to be around her a little band of stedfast adherents and warm friends, who boasted that, through one circumstance or another, occurring in ordinary social intercourse, they had penetrated beyond the brilliant, cold, outside crust that was all her ordinary acquaintance knew of her, and that they had found beneath, a large-hearted sympathy, a capacity for wise counsel, an energetic helpfulness that made her a very friend of friends. Foremost among these were some specially well-mated, though not prosperous young married pairs, who were known to profess that they owed all their happiness to words of earnest sympathy and counsel, and deeds of help, given in the crisis of their lives, by the reputed worldly-wise Alma Rivers.

Wynyard's fears that his prospect of success in his profession would be materially damaged by his year of idleness, were not fulfilled. On the contrary, whether because public attention had been turned to him during his brief elevation, or because he had really gained something of added force of character and intellect by what he had gone through, his resumption of work proved to be the turning-point in his career. From a moderate, he passed to a rapid and distinguished success. Work of

the kind he most liked flowed in upon him from many sources. His activity and mettle, if not his ambition, were roused to meet the claims upon him, and following in the wake of strenuous effort came the reputation and money and chances of honourable preferment that had seemed a long way ahead of him only two years ago. He told himself that these things had come just a little too late for him to take pride or pleasure in them. Yet there was truth in what Katherine Moore frequently said, when they discussed the reverses of his life together, that he would have found his change of fortune harder to bear, and been more apt to brood over all he had lost, if the life into which he had fallen had not had so many stirring interests, and been passed in such a stress of effort. He might have added the distractions of society to his other occupations, had he so pleased, for he was too popular a person to be easily forgotten, or indifferently allowed to slip out of circles to which he had once been admitted ; but though his temper did not become exactly soured, he never lost his disgust for the hollowness of worldly favour which his experience had shown him.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALL THINGS FIND REST UPON THEIR JOURNEY'S END.

If men were happy in that age of gold,
We yet may hope to see mild Saturn's reign,
For all things that were buried live again,
By Time's revealing circle forward rolled.

RAIN has fallen heavily during the night, but now the sun is shining brightly, making the green leaves almost transparent in their freshness. For it is a bright May day at Leigh, and the sunshine, high above the trees, makes the slender jets of water from the dragons' mouths look like golden threads as they fall into their basin. Emmie West sits beside the fountain playing with little fair-haired Ralph.

Five years have passed lightly over Emmie. She looks older—more thoughtful, perhaps—but her eyes are full of the old sweetness as she bends to kiss the child.

Emmie is surprised at herself—hitherto she has refused to come to Leigh during Madame de Florimel's annual visit, thereby incurring madame's indignation and some covert hints about her perversity in the letters which her

kind friend occasionally sends her, for Madame de Florimel is firmly persuaded that Emmie shrinks from meeting Wynyard Anstice at Leigh, and Wynyard always chooses the period of her own visit to come and see after the interests of his little ward.

Emmie likes to come when Katherine Moore is alone there, to sit at her feet, as she says, and learn how to educate. Katherine has put her ideas into practice—she is now a real educator.

When first Wynyard installed her at Leigh as guardian of the little heir, Katherine had resigned herself to give up all her aspirations for the sake of watching over Christabel's child, and just when Wynyard had begun to fear that she would droop from the monotony of her small circle of duties, old David Macvie came to her full of an important discovery. Little by little, he had managed to find out that an educational bequest for the boys and girls of the town in which he lived had fallen into wrong hands, and that instead of establishing a foundation school the money had been filling the pockets of private individuals. The persevering old man raked out all the particulars, and then, at a loss how to make use of his information, he came to Katherine Moore. Katherine at once decided that the right must be reclaimed, and advised that they should seek legal counsel and help from Mr. Anstice.

Wynyard rose high in David's esteem when the bequest so long diverted from its lawful purpose was recovered by his efforts, and a couple of houses were secured in order that the founder's wishes might be carried out.

Katherine found, in the help she gave this school, a wide scope for the longing she had so long felt to benefit her fellow-women by raising the tone of their education, not only in the matter of mere head-knowledge, but as members of the great human family. And, besides this, she devoted much of her time daily to the Leigh schools for the poor. Emmie had, by her accounts of Katherine's doings, fired the Kirkmans to interest themselves in the welfare and the teaching of their poorer neighbours, and as years went by Katherine's presence made itself felt through the country around Leigh wherever the education question was mooted.

So far as society was concerned she remained hidden like the stone flung into some stagnant pool which rouses the sleeping water and spreads its waves in ever-increasing circles.

Sometimes Katherine summoned Wynyard Anstice down from London to hold counsel with her about fresh plans and projects either for the girls' grammar school, or for some of the more strictly charitable works at Leigh itself; but these were not, as has been said, his visits of enjoyment, he liked so much better to be at Leigh when

Madame de Florimel was there, and to-day he was sitting an amused listener, while madame and Katherine Moore were discussing Ralph's future education.

Madame de Florimel was in her gayest spirits, for to-day the wish of her heart was granted. Emmie West—self-willed, obstinate little Emmie, as madame called her—had actually arrived last night, and, after such a long separation, Madame de Florimel had not been able to scold her favourite. This morning she was far too happy even to scold Wynyard for the obstinate neutrality he maintained during the animated discussion of which he had already begun to tire. The talk had drifted from facts to suppositions, and Madame de Florimel was eager in support of her own theories on education. “Come now”—she looked at Wynyard with the bright smile that seemed to carry itself into the hearts of those she spoke to—“arouse yourself, my friend, and tell Miss Moore that, if Ralph had been a girl, he must not have been sent young to school. A small world is best and safest for a young girl—is it not so, Wynyard?—though, in my opinion, it is also best for a young boy like Ralph for some years to come.”

“I have not seen the young boy in question since I arrived,” answered Wynyard, and rose as he spoke. “I can better give you my opinion when I have seen Ralph, madame.”

He went out, and Madame de Florimel looked smilingly at Katherine.

“He will not come back to us,” she said; “I knew he would come to Leigh as soon as he heard of Emmie’s visit. After all, there is not much use in our argument,” she added playfully. “Wynyard is the only responsible guardian, we cannot decide on anything of consequence without him.”

Katherine smiled. “And as Ralph is only five years old, dear madame, I believe we may leave him at present to Casabianca’s teaching.”

Meanwhile Wynyard had strolled on to the lower terrace of the flower garden, and taken a seat by Emmie West on the porphyry edge of the fountain, just out of reach of the spray from the dragons’ mouths, which, much as Madame de Florimel sneered at their meagre trickle, sufficed to keep up a pleasant pattering sound, as of rain on the leaves of the water-lilies beneath.

“Well,” he said, in answer to the upward glance of the brown eyes that shyly welcomed him, “I have escaped at last, you see, from the council of education; the discussion between the lady advocates of rival systems was becoming so hot that it would hardly have been reverent for male ears to listen longer; and all, you understand, on the supposition of how each educator ought to have acted if the young gentleman down there, taking his first

lesson in the great art of destruction from Casabianca, had chanced to be a young lady. They never take my feelings into consideration, or reflect on the bitterness they are stirring up in my heart by indulging in such tantalising imaginings."

"No," said Emmie, smiling; "but then, you see, they are not in earnest. I amuse myself sometimes by trying to picture the dismay there would be on both faces if such a transformation as they are imagining could take place. Whatever they may have wished at one time, they are both so thoroughly fond of little Ralph now, they would grudge to have a hair of his head curled differently."

"He is a pretty little fellow."

"And what a merry laugh he has! Did you hear just now when the popgun went off, and now again, as Casa hoists him on his shoulder to carry him to the house? I never expected to see Casabianca devote himself to a child, as he does to little Ralph. It has altered him, being here so much with Katherine and Madame de Florimel."

"And turning out so unexpectedly a Grecian on our hands. He has only another term of yellow stockings before him, he tells me, and then he goes to Cambridge. Who would have thought that sheer combativeness, untinged with any shade of love of learning whatever,

would have carried him so far? What does your sister Mildie say?"

"She is immensely proud of him, of course, and flatters herself that she has had some little share in stimulating his combativeness by treading closely on his heels in all his studies, and taunting him continually with the danger of being surpassed by a woman."

"But how does she take this final victory? has she no envious longings after Girton herself?"

"What do you think of Harry having generously offered to send her there, when he got that good appointment I told you of, through Dr. Urquhart? Are we not growing ambitious as a family? Mildie hesitates to accept his help, however; she wants to begin earning, and is fairly satisfied at having passed, with first-class honours, in her favourite subjects, 'Physics and Political Economy.'"

"Physics and Political Economy! it sounds tremendous. And are you bent on bringing up the juvenile Kirkmans to like achievements? I think I heard you say yesterday that you had grown fond of teaching."

"Some things. Katherine Moore advised me to keep to a few subjects, and to let those be what I could really care for. Luckily my pupils were very small when I first went to them, and I just managed to keep ahead of them in one or two studies—French, for example—which

always takes me back to La Roquette, so that somehow or other, in teaching the children to speak it, I have managed to soften their rough Kirkman voices and gestures by inoculating them with something of Madelon's pretty gracious tones and ways of speaking. History, too, I can make something of; it is after all, you know, chiefly people's lives. I can make *that* interesting, because I grow interested myself. But when it comes to pulling things to pieces to see what they are made of——" Here Emmie laid a white water-lily, which she had gathered, caressingly against her cheek as if in mute protest against the possibility of her ever being called upon to botanise it. "No, I have no capacity for studies of that kind. When the little Kirkmans are ready for them I shall have to leave them and look out for a fresh set of dunces to begin upon."

"Would *one* dunce do as well as several? Emmie, I wish you would come and teach me."

"What do you mean? How could I teach *you* anything? I know so little, and you so much."

"As if one person's way of knowing were the least in the world like another's. I should very much like to get hold of your method of looking at history, for example. People's lives, you say—but with *you* lives where all the noble thoughts and all the good deeds and the tender wise sayings come to the front, with full light

of comprehension and sympathy upon them ; and where the evil side, the meannesses and deceptions, the deeds of all the water-people, of royal Cousin Almas and Aunt Riverses—are contemplated through such a mist of wonder and pity that half their hideousness is lost. Emmie, will you come and teach me to look at——well, not at past but at present life histories—yours and mine—in *that* way ?

“ But it is a foolish rose-coloured way, as you said.”

“ I did not say so ; that is not what I meant. There is nothing false about it, it is *the* way—the way of victory, the way of love—the faith that conquers the world. I could not come to you with any hope for myself, if I did not know that you had that power of a pure heart to see the best, and exercise faith beyond experience : but for that knowledge, I dare not come. I have no right to ask you to listen to me again. Do you know what day of the month it is to-day, Emmie ? You talked of sometimes being taken back to La Roquette, will you let me take you back ? ”

He paused, and looked at her anxiously for a moment, but the flush on the tender downcast face, the quivering of the dark eyelashes, gave him hope, and he went on : “ Emmie, imagine yourself for a minute or two under the quince-trees on the hill, as you stood on this same spring evening, five years ago. Let me take up a topic

that was interrupted then. I have a great deal more to say about it now, dear, than I had five years ago, if only I dare hope you would hear me patiently." He paused again. There was no refusal to hear, though Emmie did not this time raise her eyes, even for a second, to meet those that sought hers; but Wynyard was so little dismayed by her silence that he drew nearer to her, and took the little hand in which the water-lily was trembling.

"I don't happen to have a full-grown ripe quince in my hand to offer you, which would be the shortest way of telling the story of my life during the last five years—the story of the growth of my love to you, from that first stage when I had rather a presentiment than a knowledge of what I could feel for you, to its full-grown power. Now, I cannot trust myself to talk of what it is, but, failing the ripe quince, here is something else I want you to look at, since I see you will not look at me. There—do you remember it? Madame Barbou has never had her wedding present yet. The ring we were to have given her together has lain in a recess of my pocket-book ever since. I have never been able to bring myself to part with it, though I can tell you that, for the first year or two of its being in my possession, the sight of it gave me nothing but pain and self-disgust, and a bitter bitter feeling of what I had lost. I don't know how long it is since I began to ask myself if I might let a little ray of hope colour these

memories. Four years—you see it has taken four years to give me courage to speak of it to you. Dearest, was that a tear falling upon the ring? You have forgiven me, then—you mean me to hope? Surely it is a token that the bitter memories are washed away, and that I may put it upon your finger now; and, oh! with how much stronger and better love than I had to offer you on that other day when I showed it to you under the magnolias. Only put your hand in mine, dear, and I shall feel that a far higher happiness, greater than I ever conceived, is given back to me.”

It was easier for Emmie to move her hand towards the ring than to speak or to raise her eyes, for these were too full of tears at the moment; but by-and-by, when the ring circled her finger and her head was resting on Wynyard’s shoulder, she whispered: “If you were speaking of my love when you said ‘given back,’ you must not think so, or speak so again, for you have had it all the time—only the five years’ waiting has made it perhaps a little better worth having. I do not wish for the May evening under the magnolias back again. This is so much, much better.”

THE END.

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